

Septic tank maintenance is essential

By
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Septic tanks, death and taxes are realities in life that folks try not to think about too much. But ignoring one's septic tank can lead to frightful and costly situations, thus maintenance of this critical home system is far less painful. Professionals recommend pumping out septic tanks every five to seven years.

"We've noticed that many people need their tanks pumped out more often now," said Laura Perkins, co-owner of Outback Septic, located in Cave Junction. "Though some still wait over 20 years and end up with solids in their leach fields. Then it's a much bigger job to put it right."

The action inside a septic tank is alive, much like your compost pile, except that it's anaerobic, meaning the process operates without oxygen. Natural organisms break down solids in septic tanks and the resulting fluids drain away into the leach field. Perkins explained that when people put things down their toilets and drains that kill off the good organisms inside the tank, the decomposition process is damaged.

"What we eat and the products we consume directly reflects our lifestyles," Perkins said. "A lot of people aren't as healthy anymore. Many eat too much processed food, use antibacterial soaps, or take a lot of antibiotics, cancer drugs or other pharmaceuticals.

All these things can damage the biology inside your septic tank. Your septage is your end result."

According to Mike Bollweg, Lead Treatment Plant Operator for the City of Cave Junction, 50 percent of medications consumed are not metabolized in the body and end up in the toilet.

"A huge percentage of our population is on medication," Bollweg said. "This stuff leaves our bodies and it's changing the biology of the world. It's even affecting the fish in the rivers."

Other items that don't belong in septic systems include plastics, feminine hygiene products, rubbers, solvents, gasoline or any kind of chemical, and fats, solids and grease from the kitchen.

"Fats and grease are lighter than water," Bollweg said. "Inside the tank, it floats on the top and can plug pipes going to the tank, and, if neglected long enough, the pipes leaving the tank into the leach field become blocked. People don't realize that stuff they dump ends up in their back yards. You're going to live with what you pour down your toilets and drains. Everyone should stop and think for a few seconds before they dispose of things."

Bollweg also warns that kitty litter can trash your septic tank and require very expensive repairs.

"Remember there's nothing to stop manufacturers from saying products are biodegradable or bio-disposable, but that's no guarantee it'll be safe in your septic tank,"

Bollweg said. "Honestly, the only things that belong in a septic tank is fecal matter, urine and water. People should even be careful with toilet paper. Some use too much, or use that fluffy paper with chemical additives. That can also reduce the tank's capacity over time."

Many attempt to maintain or save a failing system by using septic tank products, but Bollweg and Perkins point out how the DEQ website states there is no product that will help the situation. While some of these products may dissolve fatty items inside the tank, it's a temporary fix, as these substances can reform later on, often in the leach lines, causing damaging blockages, they said.

Once leach fields have failed, groundwater can be degraded and septage can burble up and into the lawn where people, pets and wildlife walk through, especially during the rainy season.

Some may notice their shower gurgling or find it harder to flush the toilet after heavy rain. This could mean the ground in the leach field is saturated and cannot absorb anymore water, according to Outback Septic co-owner Joel Perkins. Leach fields are like sponges, and once full, septic tanks can also fill up with fluids, he explained. Then, when people try to flush, there's little or no suction. However, if the tank is overdue for a pump-out, this situation might indicate bigger problems.

"If the tank's been pumped within five years, we recommend people to take only quick showers and don't do laundry until the ground is dryer," Perkins said. "But if you're

due for a pump-out, it's wise to get it done."

"If you wait until you have an emergency, we may not be able to help because the city plant is closed on weekends and holidays," Perkins said.

Perkins test's the pH balance of the septage, which must register between six and eight for Cave Junction's treatment plant to accept it. If the septage requires additional treatment because it's contaminated from the addition of too many substances toxic to the biological process inside the tank, then disposal can cost a lot more.

"In general, if you can smell an odor, it's time to get the system checked," Perkins said. "The tank could be full or a ventilation line might not be functioning. The bottom line is if people wait too long then they run the risk of their leach fields becoming impacted and failing. That's when it gets expensive."

"Most leach field repairs start around \$3,000 and go to about \$5,000, plus permitting costs," Perkins said. "Though some people spend up to tens of thousands depending on the kind of system they get and the water table the leach line is in."

The Perkins' have owned Outback Septic since 2005 and they pump tanks on Mondays and Fridays. Normally, the total cost is around \$350, though if a lid needs to be dug up, there's an additional fee.

Contact Outback Septic at 541-592-6307.



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