



# Septic System Maintenance

Every homeowner that uses a septic system for wastewater treatment should clean his or her septic tank every one to three years. This type of maintenance must be done to remove scum and sludge that builds up in the tank. If this material builds up too much, it will plug up the drainage field lines, creating a very expensive problem.

Cleaning of the tank must be done by a licensed and bonded septic tank professional. All accumulated material, liquid and solid should be removed. When finished, the only thing remaining in the tank should be a black film on the walls and a very small amount of liquid. Bacteria in the film and liquid will aid in restarting the decomposition process. It is not necessary to add starters.

Septic systems should be cleaned more frequently in certain situations. Garbage disposals add a tremendous amount of solids into the system. Heavy water usage, such as having a water softener, doing more than 3 loads of laundry each day, or having additional people living in the house are all cases making frequent tank cleaning essential.

Drainage lines can become plugged when solids are carried in along with wastewater. Infrequent cleaning will also plug drainage lines, by allowing scum or solids to get past baffles in the tank.



Methods of improving septic system performance are many. Conserving water, by using low flow faucets, showerheads, and toilets is helpful. Laundry washing should be spread out, with no more than 3 loads done on one day.

In recent years, aerobic wastewater systems have been installed in some home sites. These systems, while more efficient at decomposing solids, still must be periodically cleaned. No system can decompose all material that comes into the tank.

Regular tank cleaning, conservative water use, and limiting the amount of undesirable materials going into the system can prevent many of the septic system failures that occur. It's the choice of doing a little now or paying a lot in the near future.

For more information on septic systems, get a copy of the University of Illinois Extension publication called *Septic Systems- A Homeowners Guide*, at local Extension offices.