



Shore Stewards News



December 2005

Issue No. 1

Welcome to the first issue of the Shore Stewards monthly newsletter! This newsletter is meant to inform you of topics and events that will be of interest to you as Shore Stewards. Each future issue will contain information on one or more of the "Ten Guidelines" that were covered in your Shore Stewards booklet plus other items that pertain to the shoreline and nearshore environment.

THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM

This month, the newsletter will be concentrating on information about your septic system that may not have been covered in your GUIDE TO SHORELINE LIVING book, or in the links contained in the book. No, this is not the most pleasant subject for the holiday season, but it will provide you with information you should know to prepare you for the New Year.

Like your car, your septic system is probably going to fail, eventually. They all do. You can expect your system to have a functional life of 20-30 years, under good conditions. Eventually, the soil in the drainfield will fill up with organic materials. This issue of the newsletter will give you some tips on what you can do to extend the life of your system, and help it function to its maximum potential.

Be Prepared if You Expect Company

Yes, we've all seen those cute signs in guest bathrooms that tell those friends and relatives from the city or suburbs what they should and should not flush down the drain. Signs like this are a good idea, but if you are expecting large crowds for a holiday, or a big family gathering over the summer weekends, you should consider the fact that multiple flushes, high use of your bath and shower, and additional laundry loads can put a significant stress on your system. Your system was built for normal usage based on the number of bedrooms in your house. What can you do to reduce this impact?

If your house was built within the past few years, you probably have a 1.6 gallon toilet. If not, you may consider installing a water saving toilet to reduce water usage. Same for your shower heads: it is best to use efficient water saving types. If you are expecting a large group for over a day, you may consider renting a "porta-potty", which will be delivered and picked up at your home. If you expect a lot of kids throughout the summer, you can reduce the problem by

purchasing a simple boat toilet at a marine equipment or sporting goods store. These sit low to the ground, and may even be easier for young children to use. Front loading washing machines use much less water than top loading models. And remember, that leaking faucet or toilet puts a big strain on your system in short order.

Some Common Myths and Truths

You may have heard that you should only use one-ply paper. Not true; two-ply paper is just fine for your system. Do NOT, though, flush facial tissues. If you think you should only pump when your tank gets full, you should know it is ALWAYS full. When waste enters, liquid exits. It's time to pump when the solids fill one third to one half of the tank's capacity. Inspect regularly and pump only as needed, which may be more or less than that recommended 2-3 year time period.

After pumping, there is no need to leave "starter" sludge to activate the system, like you would with sourdough bread. Your waste will do the job fine. Remember, those tank additives that are advertised on TV do nothing to help your system or extend its life, but are just a waste of money; there is no "magic cure". Also, think twice before you discard old medicines down the drain. Antibiotics and anti-bacterial products are meant to kill the same kind of critters that keep your septic tank working.

Landscaping Over Your Drainfield

You may already be aware that you should not cover your drainfield or reserve field in any way. This means not covering with plastic or weed-reduction fabric, no swimming pool, no driveways, and no sheds. It also means not covering with landscaping gravel, bark, or mulch, and no more topsoil than what you need for shallow rooted plants. Don't grade, level, cut or fill over your drainfield, and don't plant your garden, trees or shrubs over your drainfield or reserve area. Also, avoid planting any water-loving plants over the drainfield. No root veggies, blackberries, cherry trees, willows, lilacs or poplars. Tall trees around the edges of the drainfield can block wind currents and sunlight, which are vital to help "wick" water away.

Does this mean you shouldn't plant anything? No, quite the contrary; planting is preferred over bare soil, as it helps evaporate water and exchange oxygen in your drainfield. What you are looking for are shallow rooted plants, low-water, and low-maintenance. A lawn is okay, as long as you don't water it. What is preferred, as outlined in Chapter 5 of your book, are native species of plants. Adapted to our climate, these usually need less water and care. Drought resistant species are best. Look for shallow-rooted plants, and ones that don't have roots that take over. Minimize the amount of digging or disturbance to the soil, as some pipes are only 6 inches below, and you don't want to damage them!

Don't install a watering system, and avoid watering. Likewise, fertilizers and chemicals should not be used, as these can kill the critters in the soil that are helping you dispose of your waste. For advice, check with your Master Gardeners.

If you happen to dispose of your brush, blackberry vines, branches, etc in a "burn pile", be sure that you don't do it over your drainfield. The heat from the burn pile can melt the plastic drain pipes beneath, making them useless. Last, if you have horses or other livestock, keep them off the drainfield and reserve field, as their weight and hooves can compact the soil, causing as much damage as driving over it.

Have a safe and wonderful holiday season!

Have a question about the Shore Stewards program or interested in having a Shore Stewards presentation at an upcoming community meeting or group event? Contact Shore Stewards coordinator Cammy Mills at 360-275-9722 or cammymills@jefferson.wsu.edu