

Help! I need a new Septic System

Every year I hear from homeowners, cottagers and resort operators regarding septic systems and bad experiences that have an impact on the onsite wastewater industry and the customer. So what should you do to avoid this if you need a new septic system?

The first item on the agenda is to do some research, and the best way to start is using the information on the FOCA website at www.foca.on.ca/environment-resources and the Ontario Onsite Wastewater Association (OOWA) website at www.oowa.org.

Code Identification Number (BCIN). Members of OOWA receive opportunities for additional training and education through the Registered Professional Program. OOWA's annual conference is where industry professionals meet and receive intensive education and information about new code requirements, changes in technology, and discuss design and installation requirements for both residential and commercial sites.

How Big Should my Septic System be?

Many times I have heard, "but there are only two of us living here at the cottage," which turns out to be a four-season home with 5 bedrooms and four bathrooms. Homeowners and cottagers need to understand it is the Ontario Building Code (OBC) that determines the type and size of the septic system, based upon:

- total number of bedrooms
- total number of plumbing fixtures
- total square footage
- existing soil conditions
- location of water sources – lake, river, stream, or your neighbour's well

How do I Care for my Septic System?

Septic care is of the utmost importance to a proper working system. Make sure your family and guests at the cottage are aware that you are on a septic system. Many visitors from the city think flushing anything down the drain is like at home: out of sight, out of mind; but remember everything stays on your property when you use a septic system!

Non-biodegradable items should never be flushed, including feminine hygiene products, condoms or disposable diapers. (Yes, I have seen a tank full of them on a failed system, but that is another story.) And do not install a garbage disposal in your sink as this may cause additional problems for your septic system; instead, compost food waste. For more tips, see the "Septic Do's and Don'ts" on the FOCA website. (Editor's note: in areas prone to bears, you can keep food waste in a bag in the freezer so it is easier to transport for disposal at the end of your trip.)

Septic Systems: The Big Picture

Homeowners and cottagers need to realize their water system is NOT ONLY the water coming in BUT ALSO the sewage leaving. Some U.S. States now require that all properties bordering a water source have a treatment system to ensure proper protection of the shoreline and water. Many homeowners in Canada are now adding water treatment systems, such as UV, to treat their incoming water, while also ensuring a proper working septic system for the outgoing source.

Many real estate transactions are now starting to include a proper septic system inspection as a condition of sale, not by the local home inspection service but by someone who is certified in septic systems. Not all septic pumpers are knowledgeable on proper system operation. You cannot just open the tank and say, "it looks good in there." A proper inspection should come with a written report and photos.

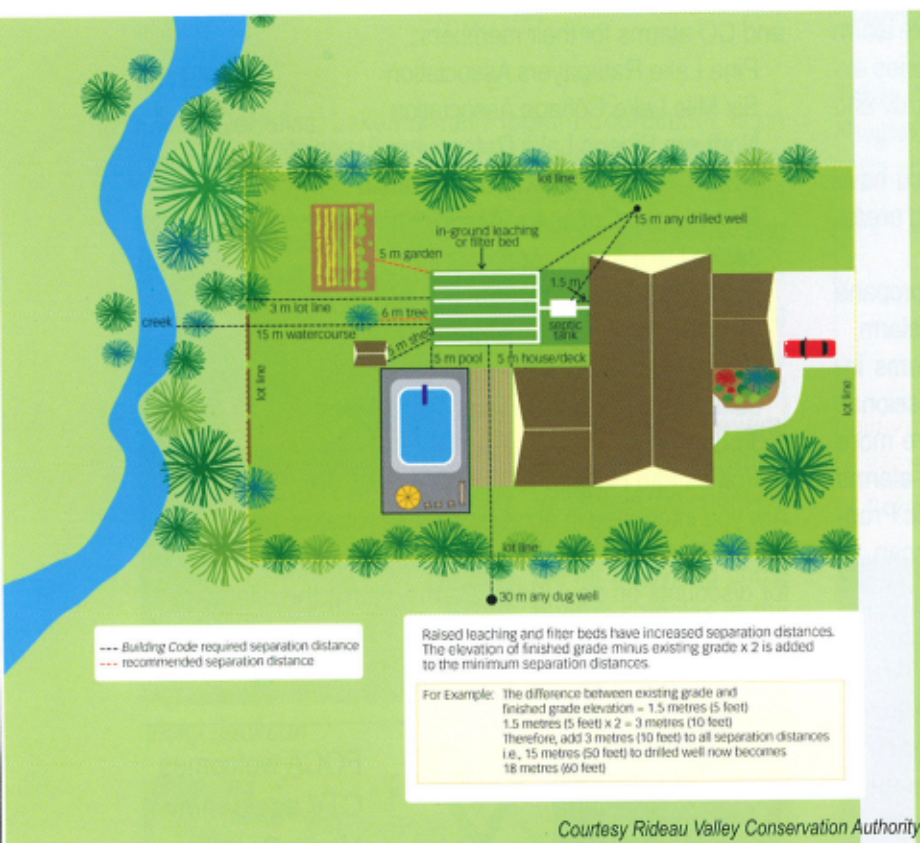
Inspections of septic systems are very important. The provincial government now requires inspections for some septic systems across the province, in Source Water Protection areas. Funding opportunities may exist for septic inspections and upgrades. Contact your local Conservation Authority or municipal office to inquire if there is a program in place in your area. The rules for septic re-inspections were reassessed by MMAH in 2010 and are on the FOCA website: www.foca.on.ca/environment-resources.

Currently the OBC is undergoing revisions, with a potential of twenty-eight changes that could affect future septic design and installations. These proposed changes are scheduled to come into affect in 2012. OOWA and FOCA are watching these developments and will keep you posted about the outcomes.

The Bottom Line

In today's economy your property is one of the most important investments that you have. Stop looking to cut corners on your septic system. Ensure that you have the most up to date and working system available. Protect your investment and make sure all your water systems are functioning properly.

Denis Orendt, Executive Director
Ontario Onsite Wastewater Association



Courtesy Rideau Valley Conservation Authority

Gone are the days when septic designers and installers could say that their "years of experience" made them the right choice. Longevity does not guarantee competency, but education and training will. Today there are many requirements from the various Government Ministries that make installing septic systems more than just placing some pipe in the ground. Today's septic professionals need to be informed and up-to-date on all aspects of onsite wastewater requirements, whether for residential or commercial use.

OOWA requires installer-members to meet certain standards. First, they must be licensed and approved by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing with a Building