



Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Associations

# Septic Systems

As a matter of good environmental stewardship, and to protect your waterfront investment, FOCA encourages all landowners to look after their septic systems.

**Why?** Proper maintenance can help to avoid potentially serious impacts, including:

## Overload/leaking of sewage

A septic system is designed to treat a set volume of waste water. Every time water goes down the drain into your septic tank, the same amount of liquid leaves the tank and enters the leaching bed. If too much waste water enters the tank—from extra guests, heavy water use—too much waste is forced out, too soon. Untreated waste water escapes, including solids that can clog up pipes and/or enter the leaching bed, as well.

### A septic system

treats your waste water and sewage, if you are not on a municipal water system. Your household drains connect to a septic tank and a leaching bed. Both are buried beside your home or cottage. The leaching bed is made up of pipes with holes, buried in gravel and surrounded by natural or imported soil. (see image, over)

## Wiped out waste digesters

Sewage is broken down by millions of bacteria and enzymes in your septic tank and the soil within the leaching bed. That bacteria is harmed or killed by **cleaning products** that are antibacterial, non-biodegradable, chlorine-based and/or full of toxic materials; and **hazardous products** like varnish, paint, pesticides, and gasoline.

## Build-up of solids

There's a lot that can't be digested by your septic system. Fats, oils and grease don't break down, and can form a scum layer at the top of your septic tank. Paper products, coffee grounds, hair, tampons, and other items inhibit the work of bacteria and quickly fill tanks. Combined, they can clog the system—significantly hampering your system's effectiveness.

## Poisoning yourself

Hazardous products (paint, varnish, pesticides, gasoline, antifreeze) dumped down your drain, come out of the septic system just like they went in, but now they're in the ground and water with the potential to poison wells and lakes.

## Contaminated drinking water and swimming areas

Septic systems were designed with public health in mind. They are designed to remove contaminants such as organic solids, bacteria, and viruses, but not to prevent the release of nutrients. If your sewage is leaking, not getting cleaned, or building up, the end result could be contaminated water entering wells, ground water, lakes, streams, etc. Your health and the health of the environment are at risk.

## Learn these “septic slogans” to stay on the right track to a healthy lake:

### What goes in must come out

To allow waste water the time it needs to be treated in the tank, conserve water. Ensure the size of your system can handle the quantity of waste water you create. Many older septic systems may be grossly undersized.

### Don't poison your poop processor

The importance of using biodegradable, non-toxic shampoos, detergents, soaps, and cleaners can't be stressed enough. Many products in your cottage are loaded weapons. Make septic-friendly products the popular choice!

### Nutrients not needed

Keep the input of phosphorus to a minimum. Use low-phosphate or phosphate-free cleaners.

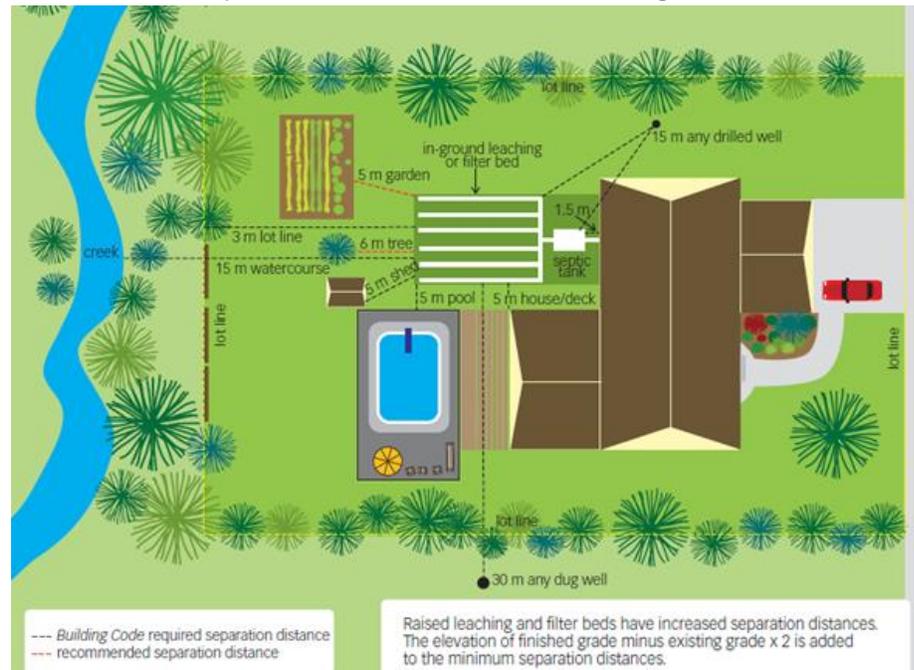
### Regular maintenance

Like all household systems, your wastewater treatment needs to be maintained. Regular maintenance includes ensuring that the tank is less than 33% full of solids (in the first chamber), cleaning the effluent filter at least annually, and visually inspecting the leaching field for liquid break out, odours or other signs of trouble. Excess solids means it's time for a pump out. Replacing or repairing a septic system (and its impacts) is expensive; maintenance keeps thousands of dollars in your pocket and emergencies at bay.

### It's not a garbage can

Don't put garbage down your drain. That includes grease, oils, fats, and other non-biodegradable items.

### Minimum Separation Distances for Leaching or Filter Beds:



source: *SepticSmart! Understanding your home's septic system* (p.7)

### Plants not trees

Plant with caution in the nutrient-rich area on top of the leaching bed. Do not plant trees or shrubs within three metres of the tank or bed. Roots will seek out and crack your pipes. Shallow-rooted ground covers are ideal.

### Location, location, location

Soils play a big role in how water travels from the leaching bed, what contaminants get absorbed/broken down, and how far they travel. Your septic system must be designed for the type of soil around your cottage. Make sure your system meets the rules (Ontario Building Code) that specify how far a septic tank and leaching bed can be built away from buildings, wells, and waterbodies.

Additional online resources: <https://foca.on.ca/septic-systems/> [http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/environment/facts/sep\\_smart.htm](http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/environment/facts/sep_smart.htm) [www.orwc.uoguelph.ca](http://www.orwc.uoguelph.ca) [www.oowa.org](http://www.oowa.org)