

## Is It Safe to Plant on the septic Field?

By Susan Camp

A recent question from a new friend who has purchased a home on the Middle Peninsula drew me back to 2015 when I wrote a column about the types of vegetation that can be safely planted over a septic leach field. At that time, the Gloucester County website reported that water service was provided to approximately 4,500 accounts and sewer service to about 1,300 accounts. Today, those numbers have increased to 5,200 water service accounts and 1,900 sewer service accounts. That means the rest of us have still have wells and septic systems, and we bear the responsibility for maintaining our septic systems to keep them operating safely for the protection of the environment and the health of county residents.

The traditional inground and the newer mound septic systems work in much the same way to separate solid from liquid waste. Solid wastes accumulate in the tank, which must be pumped at intervals to prevent overflow of septic sludge into the drain field. The liquids flow from the tank through perforated drain lines set in trenches that allow the wastewater to percolate gradually into the soil, where microorganisms filter the water to destroy harmful bacteria and help prevent pollution of ground water. Septic drain fields, sometimes called leach fields, are safe if properly maintained. Residents have no reason to fear disease caused by harmful microbes if the system remains intact.

New homeowners often ask “Should we plant in the drain field and, if so, what should we plant?” Septic drain fields benefit from plant cover to help prevent erosion, improve oxygen exchange, and remove moisture from the soil. The easiest and most effective planting is either turf grass or weeds. Some ornamental grasses like Pink Muhly grass are appropriate, but grasses with large root clumps are not recommended. Herbaceous perennials and annuals that are adaptable to dry conditions, like rudbeckia and butterfly weed, are safe to plant, as they have shallow roots that will not interfere with the filtering of wastewater. Septic fields should not be irrigated or tilled, and you shouldn’t place raised beds on the field because the extra layer of soil will deter evaporation of moisture.

The roots of large shrubs and trees are likely to clog septic fields and drain lines. Willow, birch, and silver and red maple should be avoided. Dogwood and crabapple trees cause less damage, as do boxwood and holly. Sunlight is crucial to optimal performance of the drain field, so prune trees and bushes regularly.

When you are deciding what to plant over the septic field, remember that most household cleaning products that are dumped down the drain are alkaline with a pH of 7.0 or higher. Plants

that require a more acidic soil may not thrive in that environment; also, the salt used in a home water-softening system will leach into the soil, so plants must be salt-tolerant.

A final question related to septic fields is whether it is safe to plant vegetables in the drain field. If the homeowner could guarantee that the septic system always remains in perfect working condition, it might be safe, but no one can predict that level of performance, so plant your vegetables and small fruits in another area of the yard. Lettuce and leafy greens can become contaminated by water splashing up from the field. Root crops like beets and carrots would not be safe to eat. Tie vining plants like tomatoes and cucumbers off the ground; better yet, plant them somewhere else. Always wash fruit and vegetables thoroughly before consuming them.

For more information on planting in septic drain fields, see Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-617.