

Confused about when to pump septic tank? Hire a professional

DEAR TIM: I've heard all kinds of advice about septic tank pumping and am more than flummoxed. Some of my neighbors have never done it and others say it needs to be done frequently. When should you pump a septic tank and why?



TIM CARTER

What happens if you forget or don't do it when it needs to be done? The cost for septic tank pumping seems really high and I'm wondering if it's worth it.

— Carrie S. Hillsboro, Ohio

DEAR CARRIE: Unfortunately, there is no definitive timetable for cleaning and pumping a septic tank. Many professionals who do this work will tell you it should be done every three years, but there are septic systems that probably should be pumped annually.

Let's talk first about why septic systems need to be pumped. Wastewater from your home contains solids. Some of these solids break down and are devoured by bacteria in the tank. But think about it — when you wash dirty clothes, what happens to the small rock particles and dirt? They settle to the bottom of the tank.

Other solids that can't be digested and broken down start to accumulate on the bottom of the tank, reducing the amount of water in the chambers of the tank. Furthermore, there's a layer of scum where floating material like grease and light-weight solids start to accumulate. These also, over time, reduce the amount of water in the tank. You need water in the tank to fuel the breakdown of the solids.

If you don't get sufficient breakdown of the solids in the tank, the small particles pass through the tank and are delivered to your leach field. The leach field is a critical part of the wastewater treatment system of a standard septic system. This field is comprised of perforated, interconnected pipes into which the effluent from the septic system flows. Usually the pipes are surrounded by sand or very loamy soil.

As the nearly clear effluent from the septic system passes through the sand and soil, the remaining pathogens are removed and safe water is the result. A septic system that's in good working order does not pollute the groundwater or the surrounding area.

However, if solids are transported from

ASK THE BUILDER

I was very lucky when I bought my recent home. The previous homeowner had the original septic tank permit as well as several copies of the plan drawn by the septic designer.

The plan clearly shows the exact tank, the size and capacity in gallons of each chamber and even the type and model number of the pump I need in my system. Unfortunately, my leach field is higher in elevation than my tank, so the effluent from the tank must be pumped about 30 feet uphill to the leach field.

These plans are like gold. If you have them, keep them in a safe place. The permit is also very valuable. Some states now require the seller of the home prove the septic system was authorized when it was installed. Without the original permit in hand, you may spend hundreds or thousands of dollars proving your system was installed correctly.

the tank to the leach field because they are not broken down in the septic tank, over time the leach field will fail. If this happens, you will create a serious pollution hazard, and you could create health issues for your family and surrounding families.

Regular pumping of a septic tank ensures you will not ruin your leach field. Replacing a leach field is an expensive proposition that costs thousands of dollars. The price to pump a septic tank is usually just several hundred dollars. It's well worth the cost.

The reason no one can give you a definitive schedule for pumping a septic tank is that it's all a function of how large the septic tank is and how many people are discharging waste into the tank each day.

Most towns, cities and counties that regulate the installation of septic systems require you to get a professional septic design or plan produced before the system is installed. The designer takes into consideration the size, or number of bedrooms, and total occupancy of the house.

Using this data, they can size the tank. The trouble is, you may have purchased the house and have no idea if the current tank is sized properly for the number of people living there. If this is the case, I urge you to hire a real professional with years of experience with septic tanks. Frequently, a seasoned pro can tell the size of the tank after it's pumped. Once he knows that, he can tell you how often it needs to be cleaned and pumped.