

SEPTIC TANK DRAINAGE Fact Sheet

If your house drains are not connected to a local authority sewer, they are almost certainly connected to a cess-pit or septic tank. Therefore, please read on.

The incidence of septic tank failures is on the increase, as are the costs of putting things right. Those who have experienced the inconvenience of blocked drains will know it is something to be avoided, if at all possible. These notes are designed to help you avoid trouble in the future.

Function of a Septic Tank

The job required of a septic tank is to collect solid and liquid waste, purify, separate and store the solid element from the liquid and distribute the liquid effluent into the sub-soil. The bacteria in the septic tank have the important task of breaking down the organic matter into a sludge which should precipitate out in the settlement chamber. The liquid is passed to a soakaway or land drains to be finally purified by filtering through the sub-soil.

It will be seen that the septic tank has to be large enough to store the output from the house for a sufficient length of time for the bacteria to do its work. Furthermore, nothing should be put into the drain system which will destroy or inhibit the action of the bacteria.

What goes wrong?

Many of the modern cleaning agents, such as bleach, disinfectant, nappy and lavatory cleaners etc. are designed to kill harmful bacteria around the house. Inevitably, these find their way into the drains where they continue to do their work to the detriment of the proper function of the septic tank. Detergents not only destroy bacteria but hold solids in suspension and clog up the filter medium surrounding the soakaway.

Modern labour-saving equipment tends to use considerably greater volumes of water than most drainage systems were designed to cope with and this aggravates the problem by reducing the time taken to pass through the septic tank.

What you can do to reduce the trouble?

It will be evident from the previous paragraph that all detergents and disinfectants have a harmful effect on the action of a septic tank. However, soap, being organically based, is by far the least offensive material and should be used where possible. If you have to use disinfectants or powerful cleaning agents, please use sparingly and where possible avoid putting it down the drains.

If, at present, you use a detergent in the washing machine, please consider changing to a soap powder. Put washing-up water on the garden, if possible; in times of drought the flowers will benefit and the detergent will help kill off pests without harming the plants. Do not wait until you have trouble before considering your use of detergents and disinfectants.

Shower, if you have one, in preference to a bath – this can save water as well as fuel. However, power showers do use as much water as a bath.

Have the sludge removed from your septic tank once a year. Your local authority or specialist firms provide this service. Reclaim this expenditure under the Minor Repairs Scheme.