

Protect Your Investment

Your septic system drainfield represents a substantial investment. Treat it right and protect it from damage to save considerable time, work, and money. The drainfield is where the final sewage treatment takes place. A properly functioning drainfield is a critical part of your septic system. Planting on a drainfield may be very different from other landscaping experiences you’ve had. If you are working with a landscape designer, please share this information with them.

- Choose shallow-rooted plants.

Grass is the ideal cover for drainfields. Grasses can be ornamental, mowed in a traditional lawn, or left unmowed like a meadow. Or you can try groundcovers and ferns, see list of recommended plants. Parts of the drainfield may be only five or six inches under the surface. It is unwise to work the soil, which means no rototilling or deep digging. When planting, look out for filter fabric, drainlines, or drainrock and stop digging if you reach any.

- Choose low-maintenance and low-water use plants.

Plants that are low-maintenance help minimize soil disturbance on the drainfield. Excess water in the soil reduces the soil’s ability to treat wastewater. Select plants that, once established, do not require routine watering such as drought-tolerant, shallow-rooted native plants.

- Install risers.

If your septic tank lids are buried, plantings over the tank will have to be removed every time you inspect or pump your tank. This means either a lot of extra work or extra money to pay the septic inspector or pumper to dig. Consider installing risers to avoid this disruption. Some gardeners place a lightweight birdbath, or potted plant and mulch on top of the riser lid to improve the appearance.

- Trees or large shrubs should be at least 30 feet away from your drainfield.

Trees and shrubs generally have extensive root systems that seek out and grow into wet areas, such as drainfields. If you plan to plant trees near a drainfield, consult with an expert to discuss your ideas and needs. If you need to remove trees from your drainfield, cut them down. Do not attempt to uproot trees as that can pull out the drainfield pipes, causing extensive damage to the system.

- Growing vegetables over a drainfield is not recommended.

Vegetables need watering, and excess water in the soil reduces its ability to treat wastewater. The deep roots of some vegetables may damage drainfield pipes. Bed preparation, such as rototilling or deep digging, can also damage pipes.

- Mulch with a thin layer of wood chips or compost only if needed.

Good air exchange in the soil is necessary for the final sewage treatment to occur. Never cover any part of the drainfield with landscape plastic or fabric. Only use a one to two inch layer of mulch, if needed, to reduce weeds while plants are becoming established.

- Keep cars, livestock, pavement, and buildings off the drainfield.

The weight of vehicles and large animals compacts the soil and can even crush the drainfield pipes. Again, the final sewage treatment depends on air exchange in the soil, and proper distribution of the liquid into the drainfield. The drainfield cannot function properly if pipes are crushed, the soil is compacted or covered with non-porous materials. Sorry, not even one horse, a parking pad, or overflow parking is recommended.

- Save space for a replacement drainfield.

When considering a home addition, shed or carport, or when deciding where to plant large trees, leave open space. Eventually the soil in the drainfield clogs and a new drainfield is necessary. Reserve a replacement area near the current drainfield, and protect the soil there from compaction as well.

- Keep extra water away from the drainfield.

Downspouts and stormwater from driveways and patios should be directed away from the septic tank and drainfield. Don’t drain or place a hot tub or pool on your drainfield. Even avoid routinely watering the grass or other plants growing on the drainfield.

- Watch out for trenching.

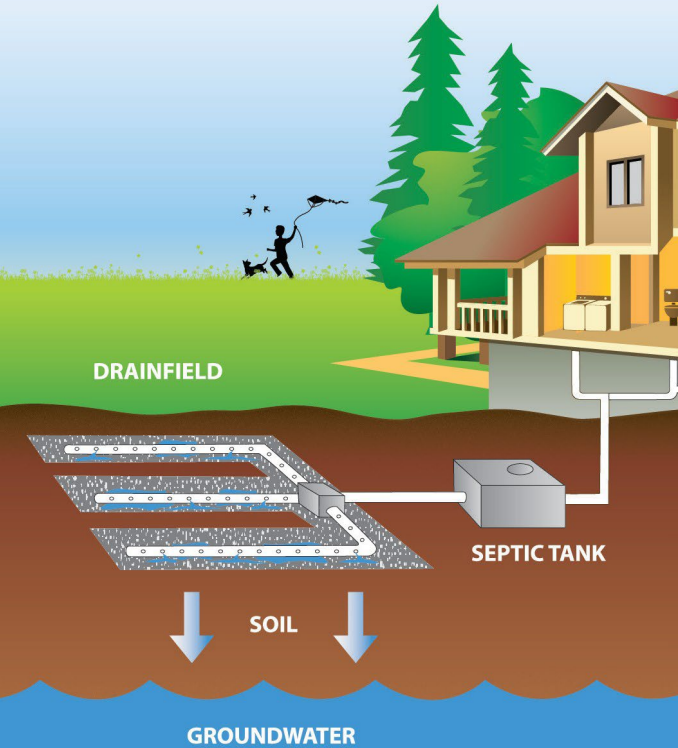
If you plan to put drains (interceptor, French, curtain), a sprinkler system, or retaining walls within 30 feet of ANY PART of the septic system, check with Thurston County Health Department, 867-2673. Never cut through a drainfield for drains, walls, or irrigation lines. French drains are notorious for carrying pollution from septic systems into water bodies or streets. Be sure all sprinkler lines are fitted with approved backflow prevention devices.

Following are three lists of shallow-rooted plants suitable for standard drainfields or for mounds.

Wildflowers: A mix of wildflowers, shallow-rooted bulbs, and grass or ferns can create a low-care and attractive meadow with two to three seasons of color. Look for a mix that has a blend of annual and perennial seeds. Choose a Washington or northwest mix that specifies “no noxious weeds” or “no detectable weeds.” There are wildflower mixes available for all types of sun-shade situations.

Landscaping Your Drainfield

protect your investment



Deep shade (receives no direct sun)

Carpet bugle (*Ajuga reptans*): an aggressive groundcover with blue flowers in the spring.

Japanese Spurge (*Pachysandra terminalis*): an aggressive evergreen groundcover. Once established, it forms a thick cover minimizing weeds.

Sword Fern (*Polystichum munitum*): a native evergreen fern that in a shady location is very tolerant of our dry summer months. Easy to grow.

Irish Moss (*Sagina*): not a true moss, but a good look-alike and much easier to grow. Does best when mixed with ferns and other plants.

Note: Do not mix carpet bugle and Japanese spurge – select one.

Partial Sun and Shade (receives about four hours of afternoon sun)

Blue Star Creeper (*Laurentia fluiatilis*): an attractive, fast-growing groundcover with tiny blue flowers.

Vaccinium “Well’s Delight” (*Vaccinium crassifolium*): shiny dark evergreen leaves with dainty pinkish flowers. A good, three-inch tall groundcover for partial sun.

Creeping Rubus (*Rubus pentalobus*): this is a species of ornamental bramble, but its leaves and small flowers are much more decorative than its thorny cousins. The rooting carpet of stems can easily grow four feet a year.

Carpet bugle and sword fern (see above) are also suitable, but the fern will not be as drought tolerant as in the shade.

Sun (receives full sun all day, or about eight hours)

Kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*): a native evergreen groundcover known for its drought tolerance once established. Requires a well-drained soil, not tolerant of wet areas.

Blue-silver fescue (*Festuca cinerea*): an ornamental grass with blue-silver blades. A short, clumping grass requiring a well-drained soil, not drought tolerant.

Ornamental strawberry (*Fragaria chiloensis* or *Fragaria ananassa*): ornamental strawberries that flower throughout the growing season and spread quickly without tending to be invasive.

Blue-oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*): an ornamental grass with stiff evergreen blue blades. Requires well-drained soil.

Fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*): an attractive fountain grass with arching stems bearing soft, bottlebrush clusters of fuzzy flowers. Grows to about 1 ½ to 2 feet and is tolerant of moist soils, unlike some other ornamental grasses.

Vaccinium “Wells Delight” and **Creeping rubus**, noted above, are also suitable for full sun.

Use these tips as a guide for landscaping your drainfield. When looking at other plant choices, look for terms like shallow root system, delicate or non-competitive roots.

Septic System Resources

Thurston County Public Health & Social Services Department, Environmental Health:
www.thurstoncountywa.gov/phss/eh/septic-systems

Septic Help Line: (360) 867-2669
360-867-2673 or TDD (360) 867-2603

Landscaping Resources

Great Plant Picks: www.greatplantpicks.org
A regional plant awards program designed to help the home gardener identify unbeatable plants for their maritime Pacific Northwest garden, sponsored by the Elizabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden.

Native Plant Guide:

<http://green.kingcounty.gov/GoNative/index.aspx>
A searchable guide to Western Washington native plants and native plant gardening tips.

Common Sense Gardening: (360) 867-2674
www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehcsg

A Thurston County program featuring a series of guides and other resources for successful gardening in a manner that protects human and environmental health.

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More information is available at:

www.thurstoncountywa.gov/phss/environmental-health



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