



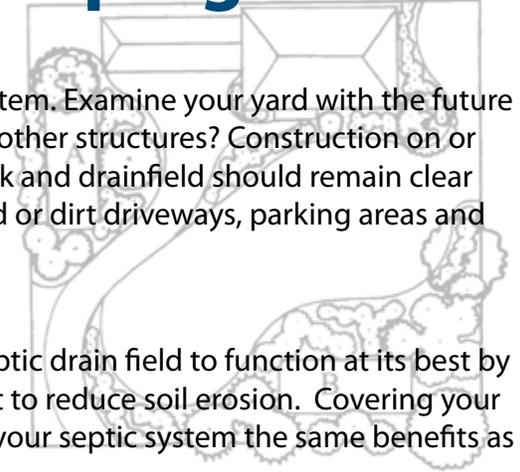
Septic System Landscaping

Plan Ahead to Protect Your Septic System

Landscape design should not interfere with the natural function of your system. Examine your yard with the future in mind. Do you have plans for constructing storage sheds, decks, patios or other structures? Construction on or near your septic system could damage the tank, pipes or soil. The septic tank and drainfield should remain clear of sprinkler lines, decks, patios, storage sheds, sand boxes, swing sets, paved or dirt driveways, parking areas and walkways. Make sure runoff is not directed toward the system either.

Planting your Drain Field (aka Leach Field or Mound)

There are many reasons to plant on your drain field. Plants can help your septic drain field to function at its best by removing moisture and nutrients from the soil. Plant cover is also important to reduce soil erosion. Covering your septic area with plastics, bark, gravel, or patio blocks set in sand won't give your septic system the same benefits as planting and is not recommended.



A and B show possible placements for a mound.



Plants help the drain field do its job

A permanent vegetation cover over a drain field minimizes topsoil loss to erosion. Plants enhance the system by removing moisture and nutrients from the soil. Open sites are more susceptible to frost heaving and erosion. Plants trap snow which acts as insulation over the winter.

- Use plants that do not like water or wet soils and that have non-aggressive roots. Roots can cause serious damage to drain fields by clogging or breaking pipes.
- Grass or a mix of grass and perennial flowers are both good choices for landscaping drain fields.
- Do not place trees and shrubs on the drain field; they may be planted around it at a minimum of 20 feet from the edge.
- Trees known for being thirsty; such as poplar, maple, willow, elm, beech, and birch, are not good choices for landscaping around a drain field. If you really want them for some reason, they should be planted at least 50 feet away.



When planting on or near a septic drain field always wear gloves to reduce contact with the soil, limit compaction, and plant areas of exposed soil as soon as possible to minimize erosion.

- Avoid irrigation and fertilization on a drain field; in fact, never plan to irrigate this area. Use plants that can withstand dry conditions.
- Do not plant edible plants, such as vegetables and herbs on a mound or drain field.

Mark Your Septic Components for Easy Access

Maintenance is easier when your components are well marked and easily accessible. You can use attractive markers for your septic components such as planters, sun dials, sculptures, wishing wells, benches, or bird feeders to mark septic components that need regular inspection. Moving a marker to access a septic port is much easier than digging around in your yard to locate the port for inspection!



Opportunities for Lake-friendly Living

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Oxeye Sunflower



Smooth Aster



Wild Columbine

Which Plants Are Best for My Drain Field?

In general, shallow-rooted herbaceous plants that are not water-loving are best. Remember, a leach field is a series of relatively shallow underground perforated pipes set in gravel trenches that allow septic tank effluent to drain over a large area. As the effluent seeps into the ground, it is purified by the soil. Plant roots can help remove excess moisture and nutrients thereby making the purification of the remaining effluent more efficient. However, roots that clog or disrupt the pipes will seriously damage the drainage field. **The challenge of drain field gardening is to find plants that will meet your landscape needs but not clog the drain pipes.**

The plants you select should provide coverage over your drain field throughout the entire year. Grasses are often recommended for your septic area because of their high evapo-transpiration rate. Lawn is a popular choice, but if you go this route, remember to choose a variety that is adapted to the local climate to reduce watering requirements. Low maintenance lawn grasses, such as fine fescues, can make a dense cover and only need to be mowed once or twice a year. Mow in October and late June to reduce weeds. Fescues can tolerate dry soils and shady sites and are a good choice if you are looking for a lawn area.

A wildflower meadow created from grasses mixed with perennials is a great choice for landscaping your drain field. They provide an attractive cover for your septic system, they don't require regular mowing, they provide year-round coverage, and provide benefits to local wildlife such as birds, bees, and butterflies. There are also a few low growing woody ornamentals that are safe to plant as well.



Wild Blue Lupine



Three-toothed Cinquefoil

Suggested New York Native Plants for Use on Septic Drain Fields

Wildflowers

Alumroot (*Heuchera americana*)
Barren Strawberry (*Waldsteinia fragarioides*)
Beebalm (*Monarda didyma*)
Big Leaf Aster (*Eurybia macrophylla*) *
Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*)
Butterflyweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
Canada Anemone (*Anemone canadensis*)
Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*)
Hyssopleaf Thoroughwort (*Eupatorium hyssopifolium*)
Labrador Violet (*Viola labradorica*) *
Nodding Onion (*Allium cernuum*)
Oxeye Sunflower (*Heliopsis helianthoides*)
Pennsylvania Sedge (*Carex pennsylvanica*) *

Prairie Phlox (*Phlox pilosa*)
Prairie Smoke (*Geum triflorum*)
Smooth Aster (*Symphotrichum laeve*)
Tall White Beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*)
Three-toothed Cinquefoil (*Sibbaldiopsis tridentata*)
Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*)
Wild Blue Lupine (*Lupinus perennis*)
Wild Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*)
Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*) *
Wild Ginger (*Asarum canadense*) *
White Wood Aster (*Eurybia dicaricata*) *
Woodland Sunflower (*Helianthus divaricatus*)
Zig Zag Goldenrod (*Solidago flexicaulis*)

Grasses

Tufted Hairgrass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*)
Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)
Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*)
Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*)
Poverty Oat Grass (*Danthonia spicata*)
Purple Love Grass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*)

Woodies

Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)
Lowbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*)
Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*) *

Plants with an * will work on shadier sites.

References: Landscaping Septic Systems, University of Minnesota Extension and the University of Minnesota. Landscaping Your Septic System, Washington Sea Grant Program and University of Washington. Planting on Your Septic Drain Field, Virginia Cooperative Extension and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Plant Photos by Emily DeBolt.



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