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Planting Over Septic System Components

Daniel Friedman

Planting trees, shrubs, and even some ground covers over septic system components are causes of septic system failure in the drain field, leach field, seepage bed, or similar components. This is a guide for homeowners who are planting trees, shrubs, gardens, ground cover, or other plants near a septic system and who need to know what can be planted near or over septic system components like the septic tank, distribution box, and drain field or soil absorption system. Planting the wrong things or in the wrong places can lead to the need for expensive septic system repairs.

Planting grasses or flowers over septic fields

Many people ask what can be planted over a septic field. Grasses, weeds, flower are OK: The best answer is grass or native grasses and weeds.



Flowers are ok so long as they are not varieties which send down deep roots. In the photograph above these relatively shallow-rooted flowers were set around a septic tank cleanout cover. They won't cause any damage to the system. But when planning your planting arrangement for flowers over a septic tank, remember that if you plant valuable flowers too close to the access cover to a septic tank or distribution box, those plants may be damaged or destroyed when you have to excavate to open the tank or D-box cover. Basically, any shallow-rooting planting will be fine to plant over the surface of or near septic tanks, distribution boxes, or septic drainfields.

Grass and native wildflowers and dandelions are not likely to be harmful to the system, they stabilize the soils in the area, and they do not interfere with soil transpiration or evaporation. Their roots are relatively shallow so these plants are not likely to invade the septic drainfield piping. Grass and native wildflowers are fine over the septic tank or drainfield, and also they are fine over septic mound systems.

Planting Fruit, Vegetable, or Ornamental Gardens Near or Over Septic Systems

The short answer is it's better to keep fruits and vegetables away from septic systems, especially septic drainfields. Planting a fruit or vegetable garden over or near septic system components raises some important questions:

Will there be pathogenic or chemical contamination of the soil (bacteria, viruses, cleaners) below the garden?

Will septic system pathogens enter in or contaminate fruits or vegetables planted over or near the septic system?

Will chemicals or salts passing through the septic system harm nearby plants?

Will the garden planting itself harm the septic system in some way?

Planting Trees or Shrubs Near or Over Septic Absorption Systems

Whether you're planting trees or planning a new septic drainfield, keep the drainfield or septic leach field away from trees or shrubs which are likely to put down deep or aggressive roots. The roots will quickly invade and clog the buried effluent lines and may also cause them to move, break, or become disconnected.

The actual tree to septic distance needed depends on the tree variety and its normal root growth range. Keep at least as much distance between the tree and the nearest drainfield component as the anticipated height of the tree at its maturity. So if the tree will be 30' tall at maturity keep it at least 30' from the drainfield. Some trees should be kept at much greater distances, up to 100' from septic fields.

Planting Ground Cover Over Septic Fields

Ivy, Pachysandra, Similar Ground Covers are



201-3542 Blanshard St
Victoria BC V8X 1W3
www.bcoassa.com
info@bcoassa.com

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NOT OK for use over a septic drainfield: these plants will reduce effluent evaporation from the mound soils and because their roots often invade and clog effluent distribution piping. The photograph shows typical ground cover north of the arctic circle in Iceland. Thick dense vegetation of any sort will conserve moisture to itself and will prevent soil transpiration. Over a septic system this means that the portion of effluent disposal that is supposed to be occurring due to evaporation will be reduced and the liquid load on surrounding soils increased - you've cut the effectiveness and shortened the life of the drainfield by such plantings. These plants are OK, however, for planting over the septic tank itself.



[The photograph shows a field of wildflowers in northern Vermont.]
Wildflowers and ordinary grasses are just fine for planting over a

septic system and any of its components. These are shallow-root plants that do not invade the system piping, they stabilize the soil surface, and they do not interfere with soil transpiration, the movement of needed oxygen into the upper soil layers (needed by the soil biomat below the drainfield) and the evaporation of a portion of septic effluent that enters the drainfield.

Using Root Killers to “Un-Clog” Septic Pipes or to “Prevent Septic System Clogging”

Root killer chemicals are not a substitute for smart planting: We advise against using chemicals or caustics to “kill” tree or other plant roots which may be present in or near septic system components. People fearing that roots will clog or have already clogged their septic system piping, particularly drainfield piping, are tempted to buy these products. This is another example of a “magic bullet” that does not work, is dangerous, contaminates the environment, and is illegal in some jurisdictions.

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This position requires a combination of field and office work in a demanding consultative environment. The incumbent will be a registered professional engineer with a minimum of eight years of experience. It is anticipated that the successful individual will plan and supervise fieldwork, evaluate collected field and laboratory information, prepare professional reports and liaise with clients. The following skills and experience are required:

- APEGBC membership or equivalent from another provincial jurisdiction;
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- Experience in groundwater, environmental and wastewater investigations;
- More than 8 years practical experience in hydrogeology; management experience desirable;
- Demonstrated ability to work independently and make responsible decisions ;
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