

Q&A with a pro: Your home's septic system

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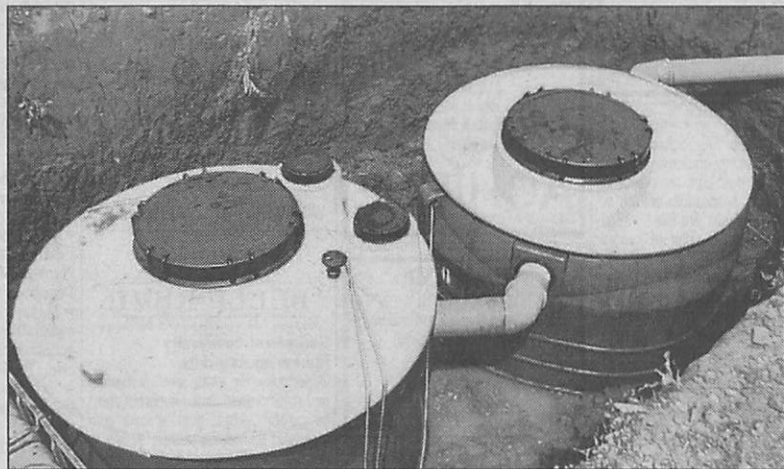
A septic system is not something that most homeowners want to think about. But when it's not working right, you'll know. American Septic Service of Walden has been a family-owned business for almost 50 years. Owner John Sloboda guides us with some maintenance tips.

Q. *What are the signs of septic problems?*

A. A backup in the house, slow flushing, gurgling noises, dark green grass over the leach field, septic odor, water surfacing in yard, sludge on top of baffles in septic tank

Q. *Why do problems develop?*

A. The biggest problem is the tank is too small and retention time too little. Most systems are designed for the



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Some telltale signs of septic problems include slow flushing, septic odors, gurgling noises and dark green grass over the leach field.

minimum, but use more of the maximum side of the scale. Leaking fixtures contribute, and the toilet is the worst because you don't see it leaking.

Q. *What can I do?*

A. Do not flush nonbiodegradable products under any circumstances. Labels say it will not hurt your septic. It won't because it's only one, but tomorrow it's two, then three, four, and the septic becomes

saturated with antibacterial products. A lot of soaps say they contain 100 percent biodegradable products, but the product itself is not. Soaps are biodegradable, not detergents. Antibacterials interfere with bacteria that breaks down waste. Garbage disposals overburden the system with biodegradable products. Some water softener salts eat up septic tanks. Potassium salts won't harm concrete and actually aid in breaking down bacteria. When you pump the system, ask the contractor for a report on how well the system is working. If there's sludge on top of a pipe, that means problems in the leach field.

Q. *What about those pour-down-the-toilet products?*

A. Some work very slowly, if at all. If you don't have the pH right, the product won't do any good. Most foods break

down a little on the acid side. The ideal thing to flush is agricultural lime – one cup will neutralize the acid. Follow that up with a cup of brown sugar a day later. Be very careful about buying freeze-dried sewage over the Internet. It's supposed to put bacteria in the septic, but it's very dangerous because it also has all the germs and viruses that came from that sewage plant.

Q. *What do homebuyers need to know about a presale inspection of the home's septic system?*

A. Do not rely on the seller's inspector. Always insist on an independent, open inspection at the outlet of the septic tank. There you can see the structural condition of the tank, and if there are high water marks, the system is struggling already, and your leach fields are failing.