

Planting Over a Septic Drain Field

What can be planted over a septic drain field is a common question among people who have an on-site sewage system. A brochure, “Landscaping Your Septic System,” from Washington SeaGrant, was developed a number of years ago and covered many of the basics to help in planning. Many of the tips in this fact sheet are drawn from the brochure.

First, get basic information about the septic system location, functioning and maintenance requirements. Understanding the system is vital to making choices about incorporating the drain field into your landscape. Most standard septic tanks separate solids from liquids. Liquid effluent gradually trickles into the soil, is attacked by beneficial microbes and cleansed of harmful bacteria so that it can eventually enter the water table. The soil microbes require oxygen to perform their functions best and do not work as well in saturated or compacted soils. Landscape designs must minimize frequent traffic across the drain field so that soil does not become compacted. It’s fine to mow or walk across occasionally, but a heavily used path shouldn’t traverse the drain field area. Newer systems will have both an active drain field and a reserve area. If the system needs repair or replacement, the reserve area is used while repairs proceed. Know where both of these are located and the extent and dimensions of each.

Other design requirements include maintaining access to components of the system for regular checking of septic tank, pump tank, pipes and the drain field itself. Don’t plan construction that interferes with the drain field, which could damage tank, pipes, or compact the soil. During rainy weather, the drain field receives more water than normal. Keep roof downspouts or other water channels such as swales from emptying water into the field. Place irrigation systems so that the added water stops at least 10 feet from the edge of the septic system.

Many drain field owners cover the septic area with bark, gravel, patio blocks in sand, or plastic. A much better idea is to use plants rather than any of these materials. Remember the need for oxygen in the soil? Living plants help in oxygen exchange and in evaporation from the area. None of the other materials do this.

To get started, determine the extent of the area and mark the access points for future maintenance. Now, what plants work best over these areas? Deep-rooted plants or plants that develop invasive root systems should not be used advisable. Avoid planting trees and large shrubs on top of the drain field. Vegetable gardens require frequent digging and foot traffic, so aren’t recommended. In addition, sewage effluent is distributed throughout the drain field, and root vegetables planted in this area may be directly exposed to septic tank effluent.

Not surprisingly, grasses get top rating for use on top of drain fields. Many of you may already have a lawn or casual meadow across the field. Grasses have shallow roots and can be low maintenance. An ideal choice might be one of the grass and broadleaf plant mixtures sold as “EcoTurf” or “Fleur de Lawn.” These mixes contain grasses and flower components such as yarrow, chamomile, and clover. They generally need infrequent watering in summer and provide visual interest when in bloom. Check your local nurseries for these mixes.

Smaller ornamental grasses such as festucas also work. Many of these change color in fall and provide winter interest with tan and brown leaves. *Festuca ovina* 'Glauca' (blue fescue) grows 4 to 10 inches tall in either sun or semi-shade. Ornamental grasses need little maintenance other than an early spring cutting back just before new growth begins. Most of them tolerate summer dry conditions. Ribbon grass (*Phalaris arundinacea* 'Picta'), and quaking grass (*Briza media*) are low growers that could serve well and provide cuttings for fall flower arrangements. Avoid very tall grasses, such as Oriental foundation grass (*Pennisetum orientale*.) A combination of turf and collections of suitable ornamental grasses would be entirely suitable to the situation.

Other ground covers and shallow-rooted perennials could also be used. Don't use extremely aggressive plants. English ivy, the common *Hedera helix*, shouldn't be planted anywhere in western Washington, because it has become an invasive weed in forests and parks. Ajuga and its hybrids or any of the smaller vincas (*Vinca minor*) would fill in rapidly. In a sunny spot, small bulbs such as crocus and small daffodils could be planted among the ground covers, because they are quite shallow-rooted and disappear completely in summer time.