

Additives Do Not Benefit Septic Systems or Homeowners

By Kelly Somerlot, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County

You've probably seen television advertisements claiming that septic system additives are needed to keep a system working properly and to avoid a "failure" or backup. Maybe you've even received phone calls from telemarketers whom claim septic tank additives are a way to get around the need for pumping or the solution for clogged or failing systems. Many of these products, such as yeasts, enzymes, "SUPER" bacteria, degreasers, or other chemicals, are marketed with assurances that they help a system work better or that they will decrease or eliminate the need to pump your septic tank. The truth is there is no scientific evidence that additives are effective. In fact, some of these products can actually cause problems and cost you more money in the long run!

In a properly working septic system, solids settle out in the bottom of the tank (some of which are decomposed by bacteria). Oils and grease float to the top of the tank and form a scum layer. In this way, properly functioning systems allow only wastewater (and no solids!) to leave the tank. From there the wastewater goes into the leach field and bacteria living in the soil digest the waste. The presence of solids and scum in the tank is not a sign of trouble – it is the tank's job to store these wastes until they are pumped out! Products that claim to "clean" or "degrease" a tank can re-suspend solids or break up the scum layer, and in doing so allow them to leave the tank and clog the drainage lines and leach field. Replacing a ruined leach field is an expensive ordeal that costs much more than routine pumping. Harsh chemical ingredients can also contaminate groundwater. The bottom line is that septic system additives are not an alternative to proper maintenance and do not eliminate the need for pumping.

The question is often asked, "Aren't additives needed in order to introduce bacteria into a newly installed system, or after a tank is pumped?" The answer is no. Sufficient amounts of bacteria are naturally found in human waste itself, as well as in residue leftover from pumping. Adding more bacteria or biological additives into a septic tank is like throwing a bucket of water into the lake – it adds to the total, but has no significant effect. Purchasing any kind of additive to put in your septic system is unnecessary and often expensive. Instead of spending money on additives, use that money to pump your septic system regularly. Having your system inspected and pumped every 3-5 years is a much wiser way of ensuring the system will continue working properly! For more information on septic systems, visit

www.cce.cornell.edu/onondaga/homeasyst/septic1.htm or call Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County (424-9485 x 230).