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Landscaping Your Septic Drainfield

Perhaps the most entertaining answer to the question “What should I plant over a septic system drainfield?” is “Something fragrant.” But whether you are planning an extensive landscape project or simply adding a single tree or shrub, the most important question should be “Where are my septic system components located?”

Why? Trees and large shrubs have woody roots that are more likely to clog and damage drain lines. A drainfield is a series of relatively shallow (a minimum of 6 inches below the surface) 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 making the purification of the remaining effluent more efficient. However, roots that clog or disrupt the pipes will seriously damage the drainage field. For that reason they should be kept at least 30 feet away from your drainfield. And for those whose tank covers are buried, keep in mind that whatever you plant over the tank—from inlet to outlet—will have to be removed every 3 to 4 years for inspection and pumping.

Planting over the septic area is a good idea because plants help the system to function by increasing evaporation and oxygen exchange. And for that reason it is **not** a good idea to cover the area with patio blocks, gravel, or plastic. The challenge of drainfield gardening is to find plants that will meet your landscape needs but not clog the drain pipes.

Grass is the ideal cover for drainfields. Grasses are most recommended due to their high evaporation rate. The grasses can be mowed in a traditional lawn, or in an unmowed meadow. You can try ornamental grasses, groundcovers, small flowering bulbs, and ferns. The key to planting over the drainfield is to select shallow rooted, low-maintenance, low water-use plants. However, don't be too enthusiastic in tilling the soil when planting. Remember that the drainfield is only 6 inches below the surface.

Sometimes the drainfield appears to be the ideal place for a vegetable garden. But vegetable gardening requires frequent cultivation and digging in the drainfield area is not recommended. There is also the possibility that vegetables planted in this area may be exposed to septic tank effluent. If at all possible plant your vegetables someplace else.

Sunlight and air circulation also help the drainfield perform properly. Avoid surrounding it with tall trees.

Think about incorporating planters, wishing wells, benches or bird feeders as markers for septic components. Moving a marker to access your septic tank is a much easier option than digging around in your yard trying to locate the access port for inspection.

Every situation is unique and gives the homeowner the opportunity to use their creativity and express their personal style.

Your drainfield represents a substantial investment. Treating it right, and protecting it from damage, can save considerable time, work and money.

For more information:

<http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-617/426-617.html> This site is a nice concise overview.

This article is another overview with some specific grass recommendations toward the end.
http://king.wsu.edu/Gardening/documents/99PlantingOveraSepticDrainField_003.pdf

And this site recommends plants based on their sunlight requirements.
<http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehoss/landsep.html>

Keep in mind these are recommendations for the state of Washington. Some of the plants may not be hardy enough for our climate.