

# LANDSCAPING AND YOUR SEPTIC SYSTEM

Landscaping over a septic system is a challenge for many homeowners. Anything planted near a septic system needs to have shallow roots so that the leaching tiles don't get clogged. You can decide what will work best and save time and money by following a few simple guidelines.

## Why Have Plants at All?

There are many reasons to plant on your leaching bed. Plants can help your septic leaching system to function at its best by removing moisture and nutrients from the soil. Plant cover is also important to reduce soil erosion. At a minimum, the leaching bed should be planted with a dense cover of grass to provide these important benefits. In addition, many homeowners have limited space and want to make the best landscape use possible of their septic leaching bed. Often the only place for a flower garden on a wooded lot is in the sunny area where the leaching bed is located. Or the leaching bed may be located in the front yard where the home owner would like to plant trees, shrubs, or flowers to compliment the house and lawn.

## Which Plants Are Best for My Leaching Bed?

In general, shallow-rooted herbaceous plants that are drought tolerant work best. A leaching bed is a series of relatively shallow (a minimum of 10 inches below the surface) underground perforated distribution 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 thereby making the purification of the remaining effluent more efficient. However, roots that clog or disrupt the pipes will seriously damage the leaching bed. The challenge of gardening on top of your leaching bed is to find plants that will meet your landscape needs but not clog the distribution pipes.

## Planting Herbaceous Perennials and Annuals

Herbaceous, shallow-rooted plants such as flowering perennials and annuals, turfgrass, and many ground covers are unlikely to damage the pipes. Don't be too enthusiastic in tilling the soil when setting them out, however. Also, always wear gardening gloves when planting, weeding or doing other gardening activities that involve contact with the soil over your leaching bed. This will protect you from direct contact with any harmful organisms that may be present in the soil. Something to consider if you are planning to start a vegetable garden.

## Trees, Shrubs, and Your Drainage Field

Trees and shrubs are much riskier choices than herbaceous plants for planting near or around the septic tank and leaching bed. The woody roots of these plants are more likely to clog and damage pipes. Notorious for line clogging are water-loving trees such as willows and poplars. Do not plant these near a leaching bed unless you are prepared mentally and financially for the possibility of needing to install a new field sometime in the future. If you insist on growing them near a leaching bed, at least plant them at the far end where the lines will be drier and less conducive to root growth.

It is impossible to predict how long it will take for roots to disrupt a leaching bed because every situation is different. The bed could need replacing in as few as 8 years, or as many as 40.

## Techniques for Reducing Tree Root Intrusion

Select less aggressive species. By selecting trees with less aggressive roots you can greatly reduce the likelihood of your trees disrupting the leaching bed. **Plant trees as far away as possible from outside edges of the leaching bed.** If you want to be absolutely certain that tree roots will not intrude into your leaching bed, trees should be planted at least as far away as their estimated root spread at maturity. One way to estimate this is by the ultimate height of the mature tree. For example, a weeping cherry may be expected to grow about 25 feet tall, and should be planted a minimum of 25 feet away from the leaching bed.



# PLANT SELECTION GUIDE

- Landscaping over your septic system does not have to be limited to turfgrass. A mix of grasses and wildflowers can create a great meadow cover which will help to enhance the performance of your system. This will also cut down on lawn mowing.
- Native plants make a great choice because they have already adapted to their surrounding environment, resulting in less maintenance for you.
- Evergreen offers a Native Plant Database (<http://nativeplants.evergreen.ca/search/advanced.php>) where you can complete an advanced search for possible plants to grow in your area.
- The following is a short list of possible plants that should grow well over septic systems in Huron-Kinloss and require little to no maintenance.



## NATIVE WILDFLOWERS

Common Name	Light Requirements	Soil Requirements	Height	Other
New England Aster	Sun, Partial Shade	Clay, Sand, Loam	0.9-2.1 m	Blooms Aug-Oct
Wild Geranium	Sun, Partial Shade	Sand, Loam	30-70 cm	Blooms Apr-Jun
Browneyed Susan	Sun	Clay, Sand, Loam	60-150 cm	Drought Tolerant, Blooms Jun-Oct

## NATIVE GRASSES

Common Name	Light Requirements	Soil Requirements	Height	Other
Big Blue Stem	Sun	Sand, Loam	0.9-2.5 m	Drought Tolerant, Blooms Jul-Sep
Switchgrass	Sun, Partial Shade	Clay, Sand, Loam	40-200 cm	Blooms Jul- Sep
Prairie Dropseed	Sun	Clay, Sand	60-100 cm	Drought Tolerant, Blooms Jun-Aug