



LANDSCAPING YOUR DRAINFIELD

*Is your septic system drainfield an eyesore?
Are you unsure how to garden and care for it?*

This publication will guide you through the do's and don'ts of landscaping your drainfield...

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

What can I plant over my drainfield?

Grass is the ideal cover for drainfields. Grasses can be ornamental, mowed in a traditional lawn, or in an unmowed meadow. Or, you can try groundcovers and ferns. The key to planting over the drainfield is to select shallow-rooted, low-maintenance, low-water-use plants. When tank covers are buried, keep in mind that plantings over the tank—from inlet to outlet—will have to be removed every 3 or 4 years for inspection and pumping.

How close can trees and shrubs be to the drainfield?

Trees or large shrubs should be kept at least 30 feet away from your drainfield.

If you do plan to plant trees near a drainfield, consult an expert to discuss your ideas and needs. Trees and shrubs generally have extensive root systems that seek out and grow into wet areas, such as drainfields.

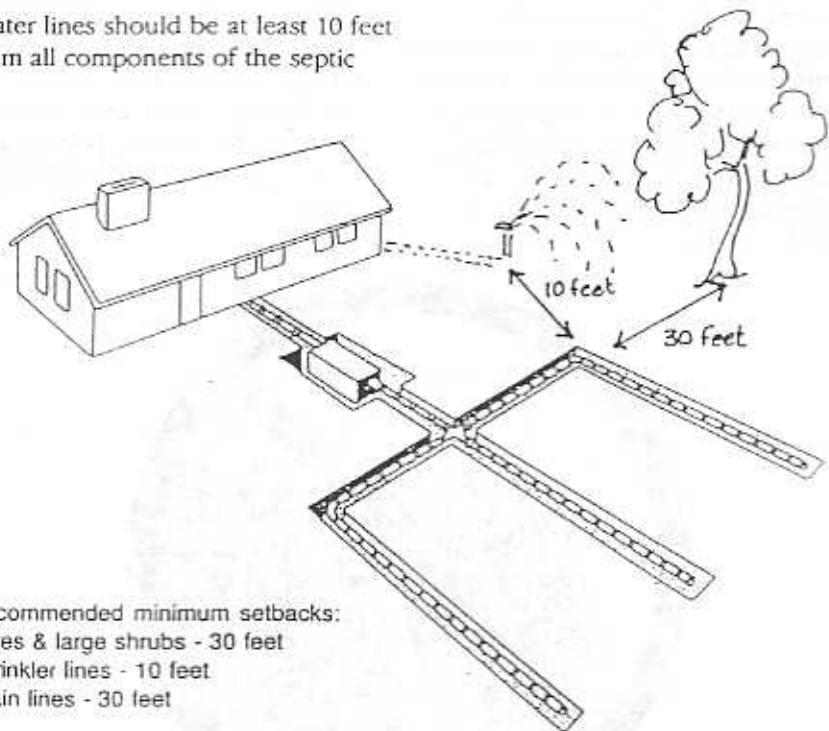
How close to the drainfield can I install a sprinkler system?

Water lines should be at least 10 feet from all components of the septic

system. Be sure all sprinkler lines are fitted with approved backflow prevention devices.

What about landscape plastic or fabric under mulch?

No. Plastic reduces the air exchange necessary in the drainfield soil. Even mulch or bark over the drainfield is not recommended, because it reduces air exchange and retains water.



Recommended minimum setbacks:
Trees & large shrubs - 30 feet
Sprinkler lines - 10 feet
Drain lines - 30 feet

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION



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CLALLAM COUNTY

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Can I build a carport or camper pad over the drainfield? How about a tennis court or a nice hot tub?

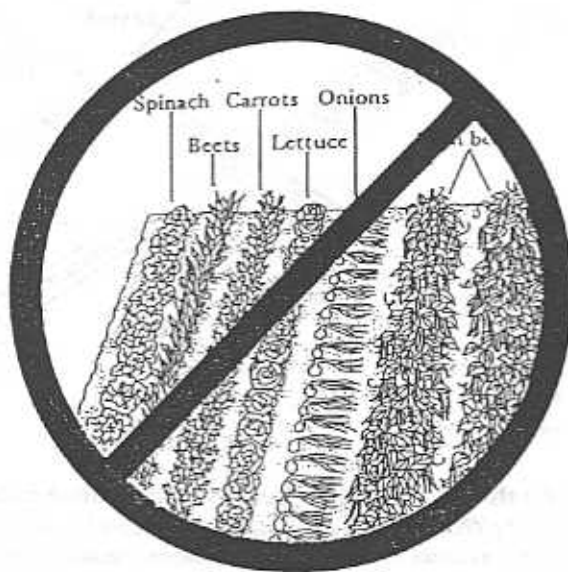
No, for two reasons. First, you should avoid driving over the drainfield; the pressure of vehicles and heavy equipment compact the soil and can damage pipes. Second, impermeable materials such as concrete and asphalt reduce evaporation and the supply of oxygen in the soil. Oxygen is critical to the proper break-down of sewage by soil microorganisms.

How about putting my carport over the replacement area?

No. The designated drainfield replacement area (also known as the reserve area) should be left undeveloped and protected from compaction.

Can I plant a vegetable garden over my drainfield?

No. Growing vegetables over a drainfield is not recommended. Vegetables need watering, and excess water in the soil reduces its ability to treat wastewater. The deep roots of some vegetables may damage drainfield pipes. Bed preparation, such as rototilling or deep digging, can also damage pipes.



Can cattle graze over the drainfield? Just one horse?

Livestock should be kept off the drainfields. In the winter, livestock trample and muddy the soil; in the summer they compact it. Again, this is not good for the soil's ability to exchange oxygen. So, sorry, even one horse is not recommended.

Rainwater is directed onto my drainfield. Is this a problem?

Yes. Downspouts and stormwater from surfaces such as driveways and patios should be diverted off the septic tank and drainfield. A small trench uphill from a drainfield can help direct water away.

And can I put a retaining wall and drains back there?

If you are planning to put drains (interceptor, French or curtain) or retaining walls within 30 feet of any part of the septic system, check with the County Environmental Health Department (417-2332). Never cut through drainfields for drains, walls or irrigation lines. French drains are notorious for carrying pollution from septic systems into water bodies or streets.

Okay, you've told me everything I can't do. What can I do to improve the appearance of my drainfield?

Planting your drainfield will be much different from other experiences you may have had landscaping. First, it is unwise to work the soil, which means no rototilling. Parts of the system may be only six inches under the surface. Adding 2 to 3 inches of topsoil should be fine, but more could be a problem. Second, the plants need to be relatively low-maintenance and low-water use. It will be best if you select plants for your drainfield that, once established, will not require routine watering.

Following are three lists of shallow-rooted plants you can grow on standard drainfield or mounds, including ground-covers, ferns, and ornamental grasses.

DEEP SHADE

(receives no direct light)

Carpet Bugle (*Ajuga reptans*): an aggressive groundcover with blue flowers in the spring.

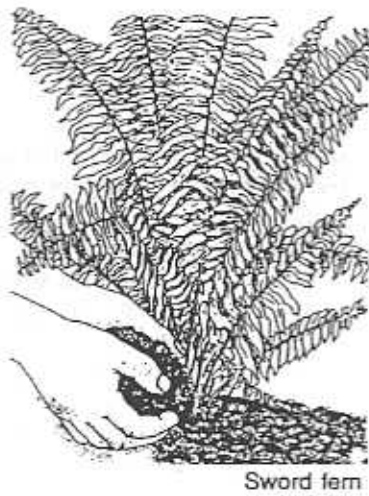
Japanese Spurge (*Pachysandra terminalis*): an aggressive evergreen groundcover; once established, it forms a thick cover, minimizing weeds

Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*): an evergreen groundcover with periwinkle blue flowers in the spring. Moderately drought tolerant in shady areas.

Sword Fern (*Polystichum munitum*): a native evergreen fern that in a shady location is very tolerant of our dry summer months. Easy to grow.

Irish Moss (*Sagina*): not a true moss, but a good look-alike and much easier to grow. Does best when mixed with ferns and other plants.

Note: do not mix carpet bugle, Japanese spurge and periwinkle—select one.



Sword fern

PARTIAL SUN AND SHADE

(receives about 4 hours of afternoon sun)

Blue Star Creeper (*Laurentia fluvatilis* - recently renamed *Pratia pendunculata*): an attractive, fast-growing groundcover with tiny blue flowers.

Vaccinium "Well's Delight" (*Vaccinium crassifolium*): shiny, dark evergreen leaves with dainty pinkish flowers. A good, 3-inch tall groundcover for partial sun.

Creeping Rubus (*Rubus pentalobus*): this is a species of ornamental bramble, but its leaves and small flowers are much more decorative than its thorny cousins. The rooting carpet of stems can easily grow 4 feet a year.

Carpet bugle and sword fern (see "Deep Shade" section) are also suitable, but the fern will not be as drought tolerant as in the shade.

SUN

(receives full sun all day or about 8 hours)

Kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*): a native evergreen groundcover known for its drought tolerance once established. Requires well-drained soil; not tolerant of wet areas.

Blue-silver fescue (*Festuca cinerea*): an ornamental grass with blue-silver blades. A short, clumping grass requiring a well-drained soil, not drought tolerant.

Blue oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*): an ornamental grass with arching stems bearing soft, bottlebrush clusters of fuzzy flowers. Grows to about 18 to 24 inches and is tolerant of moist soils, unlike some other ornamental grasses.

Vaccinium "Well's Delight," Creeping Rubus, and Blue Star Creeper, listed in the "Partial Shade" section, are also suitable.

How can I make the drainfield area look natural?

A meadow with a mix of native grasses and shallow-rooting flowers can be very attractive and good for wildlife, too. The use of wildflowers with bulbs is an easy way to landscape the drainfield and have 2 to 3 seasons of color. Daffodil and crocus bulbs are easy to naturalize and both are reasonably drought tolerant and will return year after year.

When selecting wildflower seed, there are several important considerations:

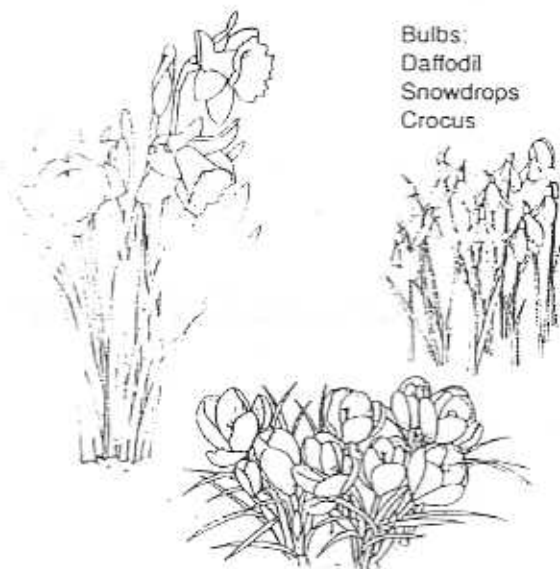
Be sure the seed is viable and not leftover from the previous year. Many mixes currently available may not be well suited for our Northwest climate.

As with the plant lists above, seed selection must be based on the amount of sun. Applewood Seed Company (see "Resources" section) has a variety of native seed mixes for all types of sun - shade situations.

The seed mix needs to contain a blend of annual and perennial seeds. Avoid wildflower seeds that contain knapweed, hawkweed, loosestrife, or other noxious weeds. Packs of wildflowers from out-of-state may contain weeds considered a nuisance here in Washington. Look for packages labeled for use in Washington state that say "no noxious weeds" or "no detectable weeds."

If your drainfield currently has grass, you cannot just spread the seed over the grass and expect it to grow. Remove the grass in small areas, 6 inches or so in diameter, and sow the seed in those areas. The grass needs to be kept out of the area until the seed has germinated and is large enough to compete with the grass.

May is generally the best month to sow wildflower seeds, when we still get enough rain to keep the seeds moist during germination. If we have a dry month, sprinkle the seeds with water twice a month



Bulbs:
Daffodil
Snowdrops
Crocus



Ajuga
Periwinkle
Pachysandra

RESOURCES

Wildflower seeds: Check your favorite local nursery or try these companies:

Applewood Seed Company
5380 Vivian Street
Arvada, CO 80002
(303) 431-7333

Territorial Seed Company
PO Box 157
Cottage Grove, OR 97424-0061
(541) 942-9547

Septic system design, installation, use, or maintenance questions:

Clallam County Environmental Health
Courthouse, 223 East 4th Street
PO Box 863
Port Angeles, WA 98362
(360) 417-2332

WSU Cooperative Extension
(information & publications)
Courthouse, 223 East 4th Street
Port Angeles, WA 98362
(360) 417-2281

Gardening questions, other plant recommendations, and list of other native plant sources:

Master Gardeners
Courthouse, 223 East 4th Street
Port Angeles, WA 98362
(360) 417-2514

This fact sheet is adapted for use in Clallam County from a Thurston County Environmental Health publication. Copies of this fact sheet are available from the Clallam County Extension Office, (360) 417-2281.

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