

Septic Tank Additives: What's the Scoop?

Today's lifestyles often leave people with less and less time to take care of the mundane details of life and what could be more mundane than maintaining your onsite system? It's not surprising that many homeowners buy into claims that the use of septic tank additives is a cure-all for whatever ails your onsite system. These claims have been hotly debated for many years with no real answer in sight.

Manufacturers of septic tank additives promise that their products will cure a variety of onsite systems woes, including: failed drainfields, clear pipe deposits, reduce odor, reduce or eliminate the need for pumping the tank and counteract the effects of household chemicals. There are no standard tests of the products to ensure that they live up to these claims, are effective or safe.

What are septic tank additives?

Septic tank additives come in two basic types: chemically or biologically based. Chemical additives are usually comprised of strong oxidizing agents and organic chemicals. Biological additives are designed to enhance the biological activity in the septic tank by increasing its level of bacteria and enzymes. Solid biological additives tend to be composed primarily of cereal grain or a similar filler; liquid biological additives tend to be composed of almost 100 percent water.

What's the bottom line?

Many agencies and environmental protection departments consider most septic system additives to be ineffective and some to be actually harmful to your system. For example, organic solvents may clean your household pipes and septic tank but then increases the risk of groundwater contamination. The addition of yeasts and other biological cultures may disrupt the biological activity in the septic tank or cause clogging in the drainfield.

Studies have found that one of the only times septic systems may need help is when the house occupant is taking a long course of antibiotics or other drugs that may kill the naturally occurring bacteria in the tank.

Buyer Beware

Several states and the Environmental Protection Agency provide a limited type of approval for septic tank additives. This approval does not mean that the additives are in any way effective or performs according to the manufacturer's claims, it just means that the additive contains no hazardous materials. As one agency stated, "If the additive is safe to use, it is probably ineffective. If it's effective, it's probably not safe to use."

For more information

[List of Approved Onsite System Additives in Washington](#), 2005

[Using Additives in Your Septic Tank: No Substitute for Pumping and General Maintenance](#), 1999