What is a septic system?

A septic system is a method of disposing household wastewater in areas where there is no access to public sewer systems. Most individual systems will consist of a septic tank and a septic drain field. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), nearly one out of every four homes in the United States relies on septic systems. If these systems are properly designed, installed, operated and maintained, they can be the most cost-effective method of wastewater treatment.

What does it mean for a septic system to work?

A septic system works by taking household wastewater, separating out the solids and floating components, and then allowing the liquid to slowly percolate underground into the surrounding soil. There are several varieties of septic systems, and although they all dispose of household wastewater, each system does this a little differently. The system works properly if it is both treating and disposing the waste properly. By treating the waste, any disease-causing organisms that may be present are killed. By properly disposing the waste, the effluent is safely moved through the soil.
Why should I maintain my septic system?

- **Saving money.** Regular maintenance of your septic system can prevent costly repairs or replacement of a failing septic system. The costs of pumping and inspecting are relatively small compared with very expensive repairs and replacement.
- **Preserving public health.** Having everyone’s septic system functioning properly is a matter of public health. Human waste may contain bacteria, viruses, and other pathogens. This waste must be properly treated before the water makes its way to groundwater or surface water bodies. Systems that are not functioning properly could contaminate groundwater, which half of New Jersey’s population relies on for their water supply. The contamination of surface waterbodies can lead to disease outbreaks, beach closings, and fish advisories.

**Do’s & Don’ts**

- **DO** pump and inspect according to recommended schedule for household size
- **DO** use water efficiently
- **DO** minimize use of garbage disposal
- **DO** keep chemicals out of the system
- **DO** plant trees at a safe distance
- **DO** place rain drainage systems away from drainfield
- **DO** stagger use of water-generating appliances (washing machines, dishwashers, showers, toilets)
- **DO NOT** flush feminine hygiene products, condoms, dental floss, diapers, cigarette butts, pharmaceuticals, or cat litter
- **DO NOT** dispose of fats, oils and grease down the drain
- **DO NOT** park on the drainfield
- **DO NOT** drain hot tubs and whirlpools in or on top of the system

Contributions provided by Dr. Salvatore Mangiafico, PhD. Rutgers Cooperative Extension