



*Client Information:*

# ***The Septic System***

By Julie Hunter

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# ***Country Living Condition: The Septic System***

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## **Keys to Success**

Most country homeowners—particularly new ones—shudder at the thought of maintaining or installing a septic system. But septic systems don't have to be black holes (well, they are black holes, but not of the information-never-goes-in-or-comes-out variety).

First, what is a septic system? It's the most common way to treat domestic wastewater when sewer lines are not available to carry wastes to a treatment plant. Most domestic septic systems consist of a septic tank and a soil absorption system. Waste from a home is piped directly into a tank. There, bacteria decompose the wastes. Sludge eventually settles to the tank bottom. Later, the treated effluent flows out into the ground through drainage pipes.

Septic system requirements are different in all areas, so it's important to rely on a professional real estate agent who understands how to navigate these murky waters. Here are additional key points to consider:

- Septic system design is related to soil types and soil porosity. Thus, it's possible to have very large land parcels which do not conform to the necessary septic specifications (for example, the parcel might not "perc"—percolate—properly, either going too fast or too slow). I've had landowners tell me, "Well I have 50 acres, so I'm sure it'll perc somewhere." Not necessarily.
- Septic system aspects include new system testing, repairs, or certifications; evaluation of current systems; pumping and maintenance procedures; limitations on home remodeling; and "re-utilization" based on the County of Sonoma's criteria. It is extremely important to utilize the services of appropriate professionals to ensure that you can maximize your property's potential.
- When a Buyer is interested in a property, it must be evaluated both for what the Buyer currently can do and what they want to do in the future.
- It's easier to obtain county permission for non-bedroom home additions than bedroom additions, as septic systems are tied to the number of bedrooms, not bathrooms. (The more potential occupants, the more potential effluent, as opposed to the same number of people generating the same amount of effluent spread out over, say, 15 bathrooms.)
- There are many types of septic systems, including: standard systems, filled-land systems, and alternative (non-standard) systems such as mound (above ground) systems that require yearly monitoring and licensing fees. The

County collects these fees to review the submitted information and make sure that these “alternative” systems are performing properly. While the idea of yearly testing and costs is not always appealing, these are often the only kind of system that will work on your land, and that will provide you with greater opportunities to build or expand than would be possible with standard systems.

- Mound systems typically are found in high ground water (water table) areas, and can be landscaped very extensively to minimize its appearance.
- Certain areas of the county require “wet-weather” percolation testing, due to their high ground water during wetter months. In this case, the County Environmental Health Department will determine a minimum number of inches of rain to “open” the testing season, and then also determine a certain level of rain to keep the season open.

There are many excellent local consultants to help with septic system design, testing, repairs, or replacement.

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*For additional information, contact:*

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