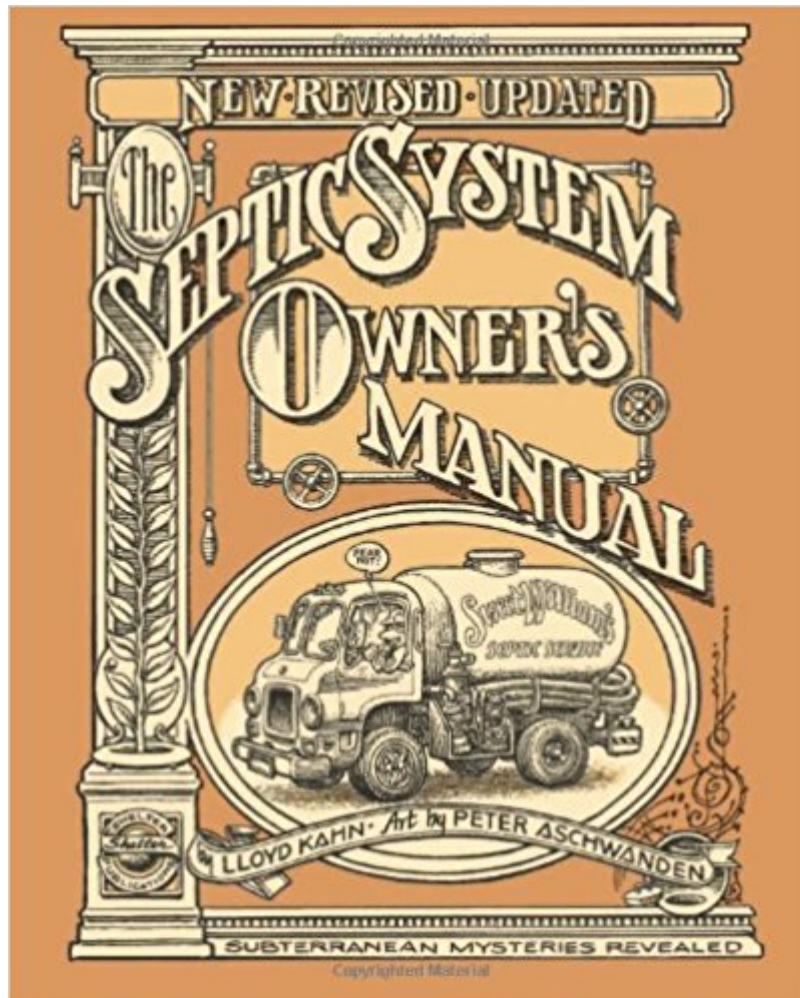


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The Septic System Owner's Manual



Synopsis

More than 28 million households have septic systems, but few homeowners know how they operate or how to maintain them. This clearly written, illustrated guide addresses that need, emphasizing conventional septic systems powered by gravity flow, filtering through soil, and the natural soil organisms that purify sewage. The book discusses maintenance, what to do if things go wrong, and alternative systems such as mounds and sand filters. Additional chapters cover graywater systems, composting toilets, and a unique history of water-borne waste disposal. This expanded edition contains three new chapters.

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Customer Reviews

..".(a) wealth of practical information on everything from tanks and drainfields to dosing siphons and mound systems."

What Its About An Unheralded Wonder The gravity-powered septic system is a wonder of technology past and present. Its operation is so quiet, natural, and energy-free that we tend to forget the vital function it serves. Sewage is carried from the house to the tank via gravity no motors, no fossil-fuel energy consumption, no noise. Wastewater goes from the tank to the drainfield also via gravity where microorganisms in the soil digest and purify bacteria and viruses. When the soil is suitable and the system healthy, it is an example of efficient design and natural forces, returning

clean water to the water table (or to plants or the air) all functioning silently under the surface of the earth

What Is This Book? There are currently more than 25 million septic systems in the United States. Moreover, each year, some 400,000 new systems are built. Yet in spite of such widespread usage, the average homeowner seems to know little about the basic operation and appropriate maintenance of a septic system. This book describes the conventional gravity-fed septic system, how it works, how it should be treated (what should and should not go down the drain), how it should be maintained, and what to do if things go wrong. There is also basic information on the recent evolution in composting toilet systems, designs for simple graywater systems, and some of the typical alternatives to the standard, gravity-fed septic system. There is a chapter with advice to any community faced with town-wide septic upgrades, and last, an illustrated chapter on the history of waterborne waste disposal. As you will see, this is not an engineering treatise. Nor do we cover any of the many non-conventional systems in use in various parts of the country by a variety of wastewater engineers and soil scientists. This is a basic manual for the average homeowner, based on conventional systems, providing practical advice on how to keep these systems up (or should we say down?) and running.

Who Is This Book For? Primarily homeowners (or home dwellers), but also for builders, architects, plumbers, septic contractors, pumpers, and realtors, as well as health departments, wastewater districts, and small towns anyone who wants to understand these very important, but often misunderstood, working principles. If you are buying a house with a septic system, it is very important that you understand septic basics, so that you know what you are getting.

Why the Need for This Book? Homeowners will find this book useful in terms of:

- Working systems:** By understanding septic system principles, you will know how to treat your system intelligently and maximize its useful life.
- Partially failing systems:** By changing daily household practices, and perhaps making minor repairs, you may be able to nurse along an ailing system or even bring it back to life.
- Failing systems:** You will be given a discovery process to search for the problem in a given order. You will discover if the problem is relatively easy to fix (as with pipe blockage), or major (drainfield failure). You will understand what went wrong and be given a variety of options for repair.
- Alternative systems:** By this we mean alternatives to the gravity-powered system typically, mounds, pressure-dosed drainfields, sand filters, etc. often required by health officials these days. You will be given the basics of these designs so you will understand how they work and what purpose they serve.

Some Caveats The local angle: Although the principles described here are more or less the same all over the world, there are local factors of soil and climate, as well as practical experience, that will differ from region to region. Once you understand the basics, we suggest you talk to local builders, septic tank pumpers, and homeowners. There is

no substitute for local experience. The comprehensive angle: We do not cover everything on the subject. We do not describe all possible systems in all parts of the world. Our intent here is to give you the basics, so you can make informed judgments on maintenance, repairs, and upgrades. The appropriate technology angle: Unfortunately, regulatory agencies have tended to require higher-tech, more expensive systems in recent years. In some cases, this approach is necessary, but many times its overkill. Granted that there will be situations where soil and/or climate require other options, yet the gravity-fed system remains the simplest and most ecological design; it is the stick shift of septic systems, and therefore, the heart of this book. The varying opinions angle: Experts in the field all have different opinions. We have consulted a number of professionals and have attempted to strike a balance as to sensible and useful information for homeowners. Ongoing Septic Info We will update, supplement, and correct this book in future editions and on the web. Contact us at Shelter Publications, P.O. Box 279, Bolinas, CA 94924, by fax at 415-868-9053, or online at septic@shelterpub.com if you have anything to contribute. We welcome corrections, additions, and insights, and will post useful information you wish to share on our website. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Lloyd Kahn's book was recommended to me by a most capable and wise builder who said it was probably one of Kahn's best books. In fact it was one of only two books he recommended when I told him I wanted to homestead and learn to build and asked him for ALL his top recommendations. To begin our family homestead we needed land. First we looked at raw land in Northern California, which would mean we were required to install a septic system. But California, as Kahn can and does attest to, is the largest champion of over engineering and overly-complicating septic systems. The battles his community (and many others) have had to deal with gave rise to this book: a means for homeowners and policy makers to demystify the whole "septic" process. Sadly California is still one of the worst places to have a septic system if you don't have a lot of money. The state code does allow for exceptions to the typical septic requirements if water usage is "very low" - if memory serves it was less than 200 gallons per day. As homesteaders we ran a very conservative estimate and would have been WAY under the threshold. Sadly most counties and municipalities have avoided taking on the burden of septic site evaluations and instead granted the right to do so to the last group that should be allowed to do so: the installers of septic systems. A more egregious conflict of interest can hardly be imagined; yet it is the norm across much of California. Consequently very few people in authority even know that exceptions can be made to the usual septic system requirements. And certainly none of the people in the business of evaluating

and installing septic systems want other people to know about it. Thankfully we found a wonderful place (not in California) that came with a normal, plane-jane, gravity fed septic system. I learned enough from Kahn's book to do all the maintenance myself. In fact, even if the pipes cracked in my drain field I know exactly how to fix it. As to complaints about the book not covering advanced septic technology, it helped me unravel the proposal foisted upon me by the septic folks in CA: and at-grade, advanced treatment system with trickling biofilter technology. The septic system that I'd have to convince the county I didn't need (good luck) would have cost 33% more than the land value itself. The book isn't meant to be an exhaustive resource. It's meant to educate the lay person to a degree that she or he is comfortable with the basics of the technology and biological process at work in a system. It can provide pointers for more in-depth research. It certainly didn't contain all the information I needed, but I learned enough that I could do all my own follow up research online. The troubleshooting sections are not detail-heavy, but they should be more than enough to get you started. Again the book's bread-and-butter is proper usage and maintenance in order to PREVENT problems. If you have existing, complicated problems, this book wasn't written for that situation. But I'm sure it will still point you in the right direction and teach you the right questions to ask. Beyond general information, it really shines as an expose' on how overly-burdensome requirements and oversight on septic systems can (and do!) occur. Don't let you or your community get sucked into needless and wasteful infrastructure projects! Education is the only sensible way forward. And Kahn executes some excellent education in this book.

Recently I have had to become familiar with septic systems and I didn't want to rely solely on word of mouth, the internet or a local professional company. I researched different sources of information and this one has been my favorite. It is a wonderful resource from how the system operates to trouble shooting problems to maintenance to different options and questions to ask your professional. It is an approachable read with excellent descriptions and illustrations. This book has a glossary and is written in a language and a style that doesn't lose the reader or cause them to feel they need to have a lifetime of experience with septic systems to comprehend. I highly recommend this book/owners manual to anyone that has to know about septic systems. It is an excellent resource and coupled with an honest septic professional your system should be in good shape for years to come (assuming that directions and suggestions are followed).

This book is very informative, clearly written and illustrated. I just had my tank pumped after letting it go for 11 years. I had to have my drainfield line refurbished. Had I known what this book says, I

could easily have avoided the problem. Septic tanks just go on quietly working, except when they don't, and then it's trouble! This book should be required reading for anyone who uses a septic tank.

Awesome!!

The book is everything you would want. It is instructive, clearly written, well diagrammed, and pitched at a level that is easily understood. My wife didn't know a thing about septic systems, and I was able to explain the idea quite clearly pointing to Kahn's diagrams. The amusing, and frightening aspect of Lloyd's book is in the horror stories he tells of civic agencies run amok. Driven by developers with their own interests in mind, certainly not those of existing homeowners, they attempt to force ruinously expensive "solutions" in places where problems don't exist. Kahn's book will inform you about the issues involved and also suggest how to defend yourself. For what it is worth, the ideas translate pretty well to Ukraine. One finds the same kinds of hardware available. The major difference is the intrusiveness of local authorities. Here you just spec out what you think will do the job and build it. No fuss. But - big caveat - it remains important to keep septic away from well water and to have an adequate drainage field. One thing I might have hoped for is a formula for computing the size of a drainage field. I suspect that it is so dependent on local soils as to be impossible; if so it would be nice to see that fact in black and white. In any case, an excellent, easy, informative read.

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