HOMEOWNER SEPTIC SYSTEM AND FERTILIZER GUIDELINES: HOW YOU CAN HELP KEEP NANTUCKET HARBORS AND PONDS CLEAN

Septic Systems and fertilizers leach nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus) into the soil and eventually into our harbors and ponds where the balance of nature can be upset for decades to come. This brief overview describes how you can help protect the waters of Nantucket now and for the future.

SEPTIC SYSTEM GUIDELINES

Why maintain your septic system?

A septic system is as integral to your house as the electrical and heating systems. There are three main reasons to maintain your system:

1. Expense: Failed systems are expensive to repair and replace.
2. Health: Your family health, community and environmental health depend on properly treated wastewater.
3. The Nantucket Economy: Failing systems can pollute our harbors and ponds impacting fishing, tourism and recreation.

Nantucket property owners bear the responsibility of water quality protection island-wide when treating their own sewage onsite.

Sandy soils leach wastewater into our harbors and ponds

Septic systems remove bacteria and some nitrogen from your wastewater. Nantucket's sandy soils, however, will allow water to percolate down to the water table and the aquifer quickly. Consequently, properties within the Nantucket, Madaket Harbor and Hummock Pond watersheds must situate their septic systems at least six feet above groundwater level. Five feet is the minimum for the rest of Nantucket. New regulations are in effect for the Nantucket harbor watershed, specifically nitrogen sensitive areas which require innovative/ alternative systems.

Keep your septic system running at optimum efficiency by:

- Pumping your system every two years
- Having it inspected every five years if it's a conventional system

FERTILIZER GUIDELINES

Why limit fertilizer use?

Fertilizers are made up of organic and inorganic materials that are added to soil to supply nutrients required for plant growth. The two main nutrient components of fertilizer are nitrogen, used to promote green leafy vegetative growth and phosphorus, used to promote stem and flower growth. Nantucket's sandy soils allow water soluble nutrients to flow freely from your property into Nantucket harbors and ponds.

What do I need to know?

The Nantucket Board of Health regulates the type, quantity, and timing of fertilizer application on Nantucket which by law you are required to follow. By following these simple tips you will reduce your individual pollution and help do your part to improve water quality:

- Have your soil tested in order to determine what nutrients to use.
- Select the proper blend of nutrients for your property. Use slow release nutrients.
- Do not over fertilize: apply smaller amounts with higher frequency.
- Do not over irrigate: add only enough water to compensate for that removed by plant uptake.
- Create buffer zones of native plants around water bodies and do not mow those areas.

Why talk with your landscaper?

Nutrient leaching from excess fertilizer use pollutes the water resources on Nantucket. The decisions that you and your landscaper make about fertilizer directly affect the health of our ponds and harbors. Each and every property owner and

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- Diverting downspout, sump pump, outdoor shower and driveway runoff away from your leach field to allow proper percolation into the soil
- Flushing only human waste and toilet paper
- Not building, planting trees or parking vehicles on your system's leach field
- Not using a garbage disposal
- Connecting to town sewer if possible

Alternative septic systems

If your septic system fails its percolation test, consider using a nitrogen reducing innovative/alternative (I/A) system. I/A systems are permitted by the Massachusetts DEP Title V regulations and offer solutions when less than optimal soil conditions exist. Regular testing and inspections of I/A systems ensure they are working properly. **For more information search Mass.gov for 'Summary of I/A Systems' then click 'Technologies with Nitrogen Reduction Credit'*

For further information:

Local Septic System inspectors: www.nantucket-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/Home/View/9626
Septic System Care: www.epa.gov/septic/how-care-your-septic-system

landscaper has an inherent responsibility to manage their fertilizer applications to prevent this pollution so as to ensure a healthy and vibrant ecosystem.

You are responsible for your landscaper's work

- Ensure that your landscaper is certified by the Town of Nantucket.
- Ask your landscaper to follow the Nantucket Best Management Practices for Fertilizer Application and provide you with a separate year end summary showing how your property was managed in accordance with the regulations.
- Tell your landscaper to use less fertilizer! Lawns and gardens can still be attractive with less.
- Ask your landscaper to perform a fertilizer test and explain the results to you.
- Integrate native plants back into your lawns and gardens. Native grasses and flowering plants require little to no fertilizer, are drought tolerant and attract birds and butterflys.

For further information:

Best Management Practices: www.nantucket-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/Home/View/8464
Fertilizer health regulation 75: www.nantucket-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/Home/View/8465

Algae

Healthy eelgrass habitat

Excess seeded plants

Degraded habitat

Photographs (right) courtesy of Robert Williams

Photographs (left) courtesy of Tom Montgomery

Nantucket Natural Resources Department: 508-228-7320 **Nantucket Health Department:** 508-228-7233
Nantucket Land Council: 508-228-2818
Town of Nantucket Water Quality Page: www.nantucket-ma.gov/718/Water-Quality
Nantucket Pond Coalition: www.ackponds.org