

Septic System Additives

What Are Septic System Additives?

An additive is a commercial product sold under a claim that its use will improve the performance of an on-site sewage treatment system.

Advertising frequently states additives will counteract the effects of bleach and detergents, increase soil percolation, clear pipe deposits, and reduce odor. Labels on these products often contain words like “enzymes” and “spores.”

What’s in Additives?

Additives are sold in liquid and solid form. The liquid additives contain mostly water and the solid forms contain large amounts of grain. Common ingredients include baking soda, yeast, table salt, chalk, soda ash, and baking powder. Some liquid ingredients include cottonseed oil, fragrance, coloring, vitamin supplement, and surfactant (cleaner). These ingredients are said to increase the activity in the tank and keep solids to a minimum.

Do Additives Actually Work?

No known additives can sufficiently reduce the solids in a septic tank to make pumping unnecessary. These products may even cause solids to carry over to the drain field causing an early system failure. Household wastewater from toilets, sinks, laundry, and showers contains an abundant supply of microorganisms, so additives are not needed.

Soaps, detergents, bleach, and other water-based household cleaners used in normal quantities will not interfere with septic tank action. However, solvents, paint thinners, pesticides, automobile oil, or petroleum-based products can be harmful to the system. Dispose of these products at your local household hazardous waste collection site.



What Does Approved Additives Mean?

In 1993, the Washington state legislature stated, “Most additives do not have a positive effect on the operation of on-site systems, and can contaminate ground water aquifers, render septic drain fields dysfunctional, and result in costly repairs to homeowners. It is the intent of the legislature to ban the use, sale, and distribution of additives within the state unless an additive has been specifically approved by the Department of Health.”

As a result, a review process was put in place for all additives in order to protect consumers’ rights, public health, and water quality.

Product approval by the Department of Health indicates the ingredients are unlikely to harm public health or water quality. It does not confirm the benefits claimed by additive manufacturers.