Properly Landscape Your Septic System: Know the location of your septic tank and drain field before starting. A well designed, property installed and regularly maintained septic systems can last for many years. Your septic system is a substantial investment and protecting it from damage can save time and money. Improper (or lack of) maintenance and physical damage are the two main causes of a failing septic system.

Plan Ahead to Protect Your Septic System: Landscape design should not interfere with the natural function of your system. Examine your yard with the future in mind. Do you have plans for constructing storage sheds, decks, patios or, other structures? Construction on or near your septic system could damage the tank, pipes or soil. The septic tank, drain field and reserve area should remain clear of sprinkler lines, decks, patios, storage sheds, sand boxes, swing sets, paved or dirt driveways, parking areas and walkways. Adequate access to the components of the septic system is also critical for maintenance and pumping. Use common sense and plan around your septic system. Know where your tank, drain field, and reserve areas are located before beginning any landscaping work. If your septic system does fail, you will need the reserve area to replace the failed system.

Marking Components for Access: Regular maintenance is a part of keeping your septic system working and is easier when components are well marked and easily located. Newer tanks have above ground easy access ports that many landowners would like to disguise. A tiered planter box or bench can camouflage these ports and can be easily moved to allow service. Access ports for older tanks are usually buried six inches to two feet, and are difficult to locate when it comes time to pump. Bird baths or feeders, sundials, potted plants, sculptures or lawn ornaments near the access port will make it easier to locate for servicing. Consider installing risers, available from local septic pumpers, over access ports and then disguising them as discussed above.

Managing Water and Soil Properly: Keep Excess Water Off! Direct down spouts, and other surface water runoff, away from your system. Your septic system is designed to handle only the water coming from your home. Additional water from down spouts, heavy hand watering, sprinklers or ponds overloads the soil and can lead to septic system failure. Sump pumps should not be run into perimeter drains. Irrigation systems & water features should be located at least ten feet from the edge of your system.

Vehicles and Equipment: Limit traffic over the system to reduce soil compaction. Compacted soils retain less oxygen, reduce soil organisms' treatment of the effluent, and reduce the system's effectiveness. Keep vehicles larger than a riding mower off the drain field to avoid soil compaction and damage to the absorption fingers. If you must cross the drain field with a larger vehicle, make sure the soil is dry and utilize track boards for weight distribution.

Animals: Large animals also cause compaction. If you choose to allow animals to graze the drain field area, you risk decreasing the effectiveness of you septic drain field. Animals should never be allowed to graze the drain field. Gardens, landscape fabric, plastic, bark, or mulch should not be used over your septic system. These materials reduce air exchange while bark and mulch also retain excess moisture. Adding more than a few inches of soil over the drain field, such as for raised beds, limits air exchange and can lead to compaction. Vegetable gardens require irrigation and involve frequent cultivation and digging which can damage pipes and other components, since parts of your system may be as little as six inches underground. Although a properly functioning septic system should not add disease causing organisms into the soil, it is difficult to judge how well the system works since that depends on many factors. For that reason, food gardens should be located elsewhere. Root vegetables can penetrate your drain lines, while leafy vegetables may get soil splashed on the leaves from rain or irrigation.

Selecting Plants: Using shallow rooted, low maintenance, low water plants is the key to planting over a drain field and near your septic system. Grass or herbaceous vegetation that can be disturbed should be planted over the tank, so you won't hesitate to damage them. The roots of grass and other herbaceous plants can help remove excess moisture and nutrients and help the septic system work efficiently. Plants that do not require frequent dividing will limit digging and possible damage to the drain field. Grass provides ideal year-round cover for drain fields. Ornamental grasses can be planted, as well as maintaining a traditional lawn. For a natural look, try an un-mowed meadow using a meadow mix, with native grasses and shallow rooting flowers. Other herbaceous plants can be used, but avoid plants that require frequent watering.