



Septic System Additives

People selling additives for their septic systems often contact rural homeowners via phone or mail. There are many “sales pitches” used to encourage homeowners to buy the product. The main pitch is saving money on the cleaning of the septic tank. Homeowners often ask, “Should I buy these products?”

There are three primary types of products offered on the market: starters, feeders, and cleaners. Starters and feeders are intended to encourage the growth of beneficial bacteria in the septic tank. These beneficial bacteria work via ‘enzyme action’ and are essential to the break down of organic wastes in the septic tank.

Starters are products often advertised to be used in a new system or just after the septic tank has been pumped or cleaned to add bacteria to ‘get it going’. The truth is that the sewage entering the system has plenty of bacteria in it to get the system working just fine. Are they necessary? No, but they won’t do any harm. They do cost the homeowner money.

Products known as ‘feeders’ are advertised to furnish nutrients to the system so the bacteria are healthier or reproduce faster. It is not necessary to add nutrients because the sewage furnishes all of the nutrients necessary to ‘feed’ the bacteria. ‘Feeders’ that add bacteria are often advertised as producing “enzymes”. Enzymes are how all bacteria work. If there is a low level of bacterial activity in the septic tank it is because the family living in the home is putting too many disinfectants and cleaning products down the drain which kill the bacteria. Addition of new bacteria will not solve this problem. By reducing the excessive use of these products, the bacterial activity will return by itself. Feeders will neither harm nor benefit the system. They will cost the homeowner money.

Septic tank cleaners are products that claim to clean the pipes and clean the septic tank. If they do this by bacterial ‘enzyme action’, they may just be a starter or feeder. If they cause the solids in the septic tank to become re-suspended in the liquid (effluent) they may be dangerous to the person using them or harmful to the environment as a ‘chemical’ or damage the soil treatment (drainfield) portion of the system. Solids entering the soil treatment unit will likely do irreparable damage. In attempting to save the cost of pumping the tank every one to three years (\$60 to \$150), the homeowner may need to replace the drainfield or mound (\$1000 to \$5000)!!! These ‘cleaners’ could be very costly to the environment and the homeowner. There is no substitute for cleaning or pumping the tank on a regular basis.

Often the salesperson will site a stamp or certificate from the USDA, EPA or some state on the label implying that it is an endorsement of the product. This stamp or insignia only says that there is no dangerous product in the container. It does not constitute a recommendation, endorsement, or guarantee that the product will do as it claims.

BOTTOM LINE: Use Your Money to Clean Your Tank - Not Buy Additives!!!!