

Home & Environment

Landscaping Over Septic Systems with Native Plants

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Septic system components sometimes have unsightly aboveground pipes, risers, ventilation systems, or large mounds. Homeowners can improve the appearance of these items through landscaping, but they must take care to choose plants that grow well without interfering with septic system operation.

This publication describes landscaping with native plants on and around septic systems.

Basic Septic System Components

There are two types of septic systems common in Indiana:

- **Subsurface trench systems** discharge wastewater into a series of trenches either by gravity or pump.
- **Mound systems** discharge wastewater into a trench encased in a 3- to 4-foot tall mound of sand before it enters the soil.

The area where any kind of septic system discharges wastewater is called the soil absorption field. All soil absorption fields must be covered with 12 inches of soil. Make sure that the soil covering your septic system is topsoil, not subsurface soil. Also, make sure the topsoil covering your septic system matches the surrounding landscape. Topsoil is dark-brown, whereas subsurface soil is brown or gray. Work with your installer and insist on topsoil rather than subsurface soil.

For more information about soils, see Purdue Extension publication HENV-7-W, *Indiana Soils and Septic Systems* (www.ces.purdue.edu/extmedia/HENV/HENV-7-W.pdf).

Use Plants Suited to Dry Soils

In a properly functioning septic system, wastewater effluent moves down and laterally through the soil. In addition, a properly designed soil absorption field will be crowned — that is, the soil will be mounded so that water will run off of the soil absorption field rather than onto it. Due to the



Foxglove beardtongue (Penstemon digitalis).

crowned surface and because septic system components are often near the surface, the water-holding capacity of the soil absorption field is lower than the surrounding lawn. As a result, the topsoil above septic systems will be drier than the surrounding landscape. That means that the plants you place over soil absorption fields should be able to tolerate dry soil conditions.

Select Low-Maintenance Plants

To keep your septic system functioning properly, it's important to minimize traffic on or near the soil absorption field. Too much traffic can compact the soil, which reduces soil porosity and compromises the soil's ability to disperse septic tank effluent. So, select low-maintenance plants that do not need regular tending and care for use over a septic system.

Herbaceous plants, like turfgrasses, are good choices for soil absorption fields. Turfgrasses are durable, resilient, and desirable because of their fibrous root systems that hold soil in place. Once established, these grasses also provide a low-maintenance cover.

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For more about seeding turfgrass, see Purdue Extension publications AY-20, *Seeding a Turf Area in the Spring* (www.agry.purdue.edu/turf/pubs/ay-20.pdf); and AY-3-W, *Establishing Turfgrass Areas From Seed* (www.agry.purdue.edu/turf/pubs/AY-3.pdf).

Consider Native Plants

Native plants are an alternative to the conventional turfgrass found in most managed landscapes. Native plants originated in or were dispersed to an area through natural processes

rather than being transported by human activity. The plants recommended below are native to Indiana, although not necessarily all regions of the state.

The following tables group native plants by type: wildflowers, sedges, and grasses. Native grasses usually tolerate dry conditions very well, but may not tolerate regular mowing. Homeowners can combine native wildflowers and native grasses to form meadows over the soil absorption field. When using native plants, select

Native Wildflowers

Common Name	Scientific Name	Bloom Color	Bloom Season	Light Requirement
wild garlic ¹	<i>Allium canadense</i>	white/pink	May-July	sun
nodding wild onion	<i>Allium cernuum</i>	white	June-September	sun
field pussytoes ¹	<i>Antennaria neglecta</i>	red	April-June	sun
wild columbine	<i>Aquilegia canadensis</i>	pink/yellow	early summer	part shade, shade
butterflyweed	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	orange	June-September	sun, part shade
sand coreopsis	<i>Coreopsis lanceolata</i>	yellow	May-August	sun, part shade
prairie coreopsis	<i>Coreopsis palmata</i>	yellow	June-July	sun, part shade
white prairie clover	<i>Dalea candida</i>	white	June-October	sun
purple prairie clover	<i>Dalea purpurea</i>	purple	June-September	sun
pale purple coneflower	<i>Echinacea pallida</i>	pink, purple	May-July	sun
purple coneflower	<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	purple	July-August	sun, part shade
rattlesnake master	<i>Eryngium yuccifolium</i>	white	July-September	sun
bigleaf aster	<i>Eurybia macrophylla</i> ³	white, purple	July-October	part shade
wild geranium	<i>Geranium maculatum</i>	pink	April-July	part shade
western sunflower	<i>Helianthus occidentalis</i>	yellow	July-October	sun
prairie sunflower	<i>Helianthus pauciflorus</i>	yellow	July-October	sun
false sunflower ²	<i>Heliopsis helianthoides</i>	yellow	June-October	sun
rough blazing star	<i>Liatriis aspera</i>	purple	August-September	sun
sundial lupine	<i>Lupinus perennis</i>	blue, purple	May-July	sun
wild bergamot	<i>Monarda fistulosa</i>	white, pink, purple	June-October	sun, part shade
foxglove beardtongue	<i>Penstemon digitalis</i>	white	May-July	part shade
black-eyed Susan	<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>	yellow	June-October	sun, part shade
brown-eyed Susan	<i>Rudbeckia triloba</i>	yellow	August-October	sun, part shade
old field goldenrod	<i>Solidago nemoralis</i>	yellow	August-November	sun, part shade
showy goldenrod	<i>Solidago speciosa</i>	yellow	August-November	sun, part shade
smooth blue aster	<i>Symphyotrichum laeve</i> ³	blue, purple	August-October	sun
birdfoot violet ¹	<i>Viola pedata</i>	blue, violet	April-August	part shade

¹May be difficult to find commercially.

²Very aggressive and spreading.

³Often assigned to the genus *Aster*.