BOULDER & BEAM
OWEN SOUND & GREY-BRUCE

HOMEOWNER RESOURCE — SEPTIC

The Grey-Bruce Septic Owner's Guide.

How your system works, how it gets approved, and how to make it last 30+ years — written for rural property owners by a licensed Part 8 installer.

PART 8 BCIN #130137 **OOWA** MEMBER **OWEN SOUND** ONTARIO

01 WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS

A treatment plant, buried in your yard.

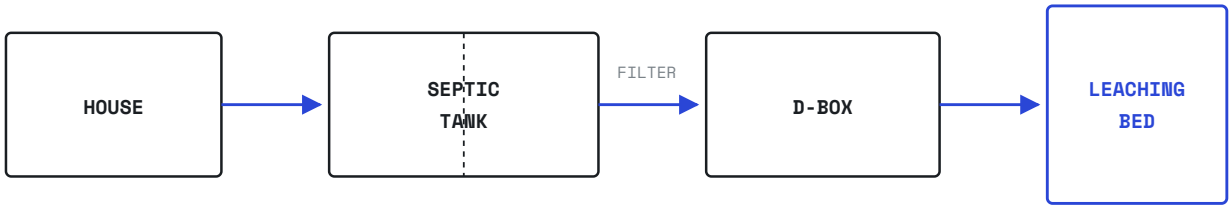
If your home isn't on municipal sewers — and most rural, cottage, and waterfront properties in Grey-Bruce aren't — your septic system quietly does the job of a wastewater plant. Treat it well and it protects your property value, your well water, and the lakes we all live here for. Neglect it, and it becomes one of the most expensive repairs a rural property can generate.

Most septic failures aren't bad luck. They're the result of a decade of small, avoidable habits — and almost all of them are covered in the pages that follow. This guide condenses what the Ontario Building Code, the Ontario Onsite Wastewater Association (OOWA), and thirty-plus years of provincial homeowner guidance actually say, minus the jargon.

Two parts, one job: tank, then bed.

A conventional system has a septic tank and a leaching bed (you may hear "tile bed" or "weeping bed"). The tank separates; the bed treats. Everything in this guide flows from protecting those two jobs.

THE PATH YOUR WASTEWATER TAKES



01 — THE TANK

Separation, no oxygen

A buried, watertight, two-chamber tank. Solids settle to the bottom as sludge; fats and grease float as scum; bacteria begin breaking waste down anaerobically. Ontario sizes tanks to hold roughly twice your home's daily flow, so everything gets time to settle.

02 — THE FILTER

The bed's bodyguard

Since 2006 the Building Code requires an effluent filter on the tank outlet. It stops suspended solids from escaping to the bed — and it needs cleaning **at least once a year**. A clogged filter backs sewage up; a missing one wrecks beds.

03 — THE BED

Where treatment happens

Perforated pipes distribute liquid over native soil or imported fill. Soil, oxygen-breathing microbes, and minerals strip out bacteria, viruses, and nutrients before water reaches the groundwater. This is the expensive part — and the part your habits protect.

ADVANCED SYSTEMS

Some lots need more than a conventional bed — treatment units, pump chambers, filter or raised beds on shallow or waterfront sites. They treat to a higher standard but come with a non-negotiable catch: **manufacturer-specified maintenance**, often under a service agreement. If your system has an alarm panel, you own one of these.

Every system needs a permit. Here's the path.

New or replacement septic systems in Ontario are regulated under Part 8 of the Building Code. The permit isn't red tape you can skip — an unpermitted system can stall a sale, void insurance arguments, and force a redo at your cost.

STEP 1

Find your approval authority

Depending on where you live, septic permits are issued by the **municipality, the health unit, or the conservation authority**. Your municipal office can tell you which one covers your property.

STEP 2

Get the application

The forms are standardized province-wide, but each authority adds its own local requirements — fee schedules, extra drawings, site-specific rules.

STEP 3

Assemble the evidence

A complete application includes the property details, a site plan showing wells, buildings, and neighbouring systems, designer and installer information, fixture counts — and **soil data from test pits** that supports the proposed design.

STEP 4

Use qualified people

Ontario requires sewage system designers and installers to be qualified and registered with the province (that's what a BCIN is). A qualified installer handles the application, the inspections, and the questions — so you don't have to.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE WITH US

Boulder & Beam designs and installs Part 8 systems as one package — test pits, design, permit application, installation, inspections, final grade. One licensed crew (BCIN #130137), one accountable scope. We don't do design-only work or repairs; if a system is done, we say so and quote the replacement.

Four habits beat every gadget.

A well-built system should last 30 years or more. The owners who get the "or more" do these four things — none of them expensive, all of them cheaper than a new bed.

HABIT 01

Pump on the 1/3 rule

The Code expects tanks to be pumped when solids reach one-third of capacity — for most households that's **every 3–5 years**. More people or new high-water appliances shorten the interval. Keep the receipts; buyers and inspectors will ask.

HABIT 02

Pump in summer or early fall

It gives bacteria time to re-establish before winter, the ground isn't frozen, and spring's high water table has receded. A tank pumped in December is a tank that struggles until May.

HABIT 03

Clean the effluent filter yearly

It's a ten-minute job that prevents the most common avoidable backup. If you don't know where yours is — or whether you have one — ask your pumper at the next pump-out.

HABIT 04

Install risers, keep records

Tank risers bring the lids to grade so servicing doesn't require excavation. Keep a folder: permit, site plan, pump-out receipts, filter cleanings. It's the system's medical chart — and a selling document later.

SAFETY — NOT OPTIONAL

Never open or enter a septic tank yourself. Tanks contain gases that can kill in seconds, and an open lid is a drowning hazard. Inspection and pumping are jobs for licensed professionals with the right equipment — full stop.

The fridge list.

Print this page. Everything on it protects one of two things: the bacteria doing the work, or the bed doing the treating.

PROTECT THE BACTERIA — NEVER PUT IN

- × Fats, oils, and grease — they float, build scum, and migrate to the bed
- × "Flushable" wipes, hygiene products, dental floss, cigarette butts
- × Paints, solvents, fuels, pesticides — these kill the tank and can reach groundwater
- × Harsh drain cleaners and excessive antibacterial soaps or bleach
- × Medications — the tank can't treat them
- × Coffee grounds, eggshells, kitty litter — and skip the garburator entirely; it doubles the solids load

PROTECT THE BED

- → Keep vehicles, equipment, and structures off it — compaction starves the soil of oxygen
- → No trees or shrubs on or near the bed; roots clog pipes
- → No patios, asphalt, or hard surfaces over any part of the system
- → Direct downspouts, sump pumps, and roof runoff away from the tank and bed
- → Don't over-water the lawn above the bed or run sprinklers over it
- → Spread laundry through the week; fix running toilets — hydraulic overload is a silent killer

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

If it didn't come from a person or a roll of toilet paper, it probably doesn't belong in the tank — and if it's heavier than a lawnmower, it doesn't belong on the bed.

Additives: the straight answer.

Every hardware store sells something that promises to make your tank maintain itself. Independent third-party studies say the same thing the industry association says: **no additive prevents sludge from accumulating.** Nothing replaces pumping.

TYPE 01

Inorganic (acids & alkalis)

Marketed as clog-openers. They can kill the tank's bacteria outright and **corrode concrete tanks** until they leak. Avoid entirely.

TYPE 02

Organic solvents

Degreasers that do break down fats — and also kill the biology and can carry contamination toward groundwater. The "success" pushes suspended solids into the bed, clogging it faster.

TYPE 03

Biological (bacteria & enzymes)

The gentlest category — and the most oversold. A healthy tank already has a stable bacterial population; added microbes mostly compete with it. Enzymes can't reproduce, and the independent evidence for them is thin.

OUR POSITION

We install systems for a living and we don't sell additives — that should tell you something. Put the $20 a month toward a pump-out every 3–5 years and an annual filter clean. If you do want to use a biological product, look for a certified eco-label and treat it as a supplement to pumping, never a substitute.

How systems ask for help.

Septic systems rarely fail overnight — they signal first. Any one of these deserves a call; two or more means stop waiting.

- → **Slow or backed-up drains and toilets** — the classic first symptom, often blamed on plumbing
- → **Sewage odours** in the house, over the tank, or near the bed
- → **Soggy, spongy ground** or unusually lush, green grass over the bed — the system is surfacing instead of treating
- → **Surface ponding of effluent** anywhere near the system — treat this as urgent; it's a health hazard
- → **Alarm lights or bells** on treatment units, or dosing pumps that run constantly (or never)
- → **Well water changes** — odd taste or smell on a property with both well and septic warrants immediate water testing

FIRST CALL

Your pumper or a licensed installer

A pumping firm can often diagnose whether the problem is the tank, the filter, or the bed. Licensed installers can assess whether you're looking at a fix or a replacement.

IF IT'S SERIOUS

Your approval authority

Significant repairs and full replacements need a permit and inspection from the same authority that approved the system — municipality, health unit, or conservation authority.

WHERE WE FIT

We don't patch failing systems — honestly, patches on a failed bed rarely buy more than a season. What we do: assess it straight, and if it's done, design and install the replacement under one permit and one crew. Call (519) 387-1597 for a no-pressure site assessment.

The $30,000 question in every rural deal.

A septic system is a major buried asset with a 30ish year lifespan — and it's invisible on a showing. Whether you're buying or selling in Grey-Bruce, the system deserves the same diligence as the roof.

IF YOU'RE BUYING

- → Ask for the paper: permit, site plan, and pump-out / maintenance receipts. No records is itself information.
- → Find out where the tank and bed actually are — the seller, the local building department or health unit, the original installer, or a pumping firm can usually locate them
- → Get a professional septic inspection before closing, not a glance at green grass — and on well-and-septic properties, test the well water too
- → Price the age: a 25-year-old bed isn't a defect, but it is a coming expense. Negotiate like it.

IF YOU'RE SELLING

- → A folder of maintenance records is the cheapest value-add a rural listing has
- → Pump and inspect before listing — surprises found by the buyer's inspector cost more than the pump-out
- → Know your system's age and type so it can be represented accurately

> TIP FROM THE OOWA HOMEOWNER GUIDE
>
> When buying, ask for past and present sewage system records including pump-out receipts and reports. A sewage system is a major financial investment — factor it into the purchase like any other big-ticket component of the home.

09 SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Don't take our word for it.

This guide draws on the Ontario Onsite Wastewater Association's homeowner resources, the Ontario Ministry of the Environment's *A Guide to Operating & Maintaining Your Septic System*, CMHC's *Buying a House with a Well and Septic System*, and Part 8 of the Ontario Building Code.

- OOWA.ORG/HOMEOWNER-RESOURCES/HOW-A-SEPTIC-TANK-WORKS
- OOWA.ORG/HOMEOWNER-RESOURCES/SEPTIC-SYSTEM-APPROVAL-PROCESS
- OOWA.ORG/HOMEOWNER-RESOURCES/SEPTIC-TANK-ADDITIVES
- OOWA.ORG/BUSINESS-DIRECTORY-MAP — FIND OOWA MEMBERS

BOULDER & BEAM

OWEN SOUND & GREY-BRUCE

Boulder & Beam is an owner-led building team in Owen Sound. We design and install Part 8 septic systems — replacements, new installs, and septic within larger builds — for rural and waterfront properties across Grey and Bruce County.

PART 8 BCIN #130137 **OOWA** MEMBER **(519) 387-1597** **BOULDERANDBEAM.COM**