Understanding and Resolving Odor Concerns

Occasionally, an unpleasant odor around a property may raise concerns about the septic system. Before determining the cause, it's important to confirm whether the system is actually the source. A qualified service provider can inspect the system and investigate other potential sources, such as the disposal area, standing water, or odors from an adjacent property.

If the septic system is identified as the source, the next step is to answer two questions: 'Why does it smell?', and 'Why do I smell it?'

Why Does the System Smell?

Wastewater treatment systems rely on naturally-occurring biological and chemical processes to break down waste. Although treatment systems use different designs, components, and methods to support and accelerate these processes, they all depend on maintaining the right conditions for effective treatment. A healthy system typically has an earthy smell, sometimes with a slight ammonia-like odor; an upset system, however, may produce foul, sulfur-like odors. Common causes include excessive organic loading, insufficient oxygen relative to treatment demand, substances that disrupt the beneficial microorganisms, or sudden surges in wastewater flow that exceed the system's treatment capacity.

Organic loading refers to the amount or concentration of organic material in the incoming wastewater. The strength of the wastewater can vary depending on how a building is used. For example, wastewater from an office building may have a higher organic concentration because it typically lacks the showers, laundry, and other water uses that help dilute wastewater in a residential setting. Certain medications, harsh cleaning products, and toilet bowl cleaning tablets may also affect the biological process, depending on the substance and amount entering the system.

The Owner's Manual provides guidance on proper system use and substances to avoid. We encourage homeowners to work with their service providers to review usage habits and identify potential causes. Our Homeowner Questionnaire can help narrow down contributing factors, and GTS provides technical support as needed.

Why Is the Odor Escaping?

A properly installed, sealed, and vented system should help contain and manage odors. If odors are noticeable near the treatment unit, the service provider should inspect the risers, lids, and adapter rings for proper sealing. If odors occur elsewhere on the property, the venting arrangement and other potential odor pathways may need to be evaluated. Carbon filters can help reduce odors, but they do not necessarily address the underlying cause. Identifying and correcting the source of the odor is the priority.

Because these concerns often involve site-specific conditions, installation, or venting, the local service provider is best positioned to investigate and make any necessary corrections. GTS supports the provider with product knowledge and technical guidance throughout the troubleshooting process.

How We Can Help

As a system supplier, GTS provides product expertise and technical support, while the local service provider evaluates the system and conditions at the property. When a homeowner contacts us about an odor concern, we recommend starting with the service provider, who can assess the situation firsthand. By working together, we can help identify the cause and determine the most appropriate path toward resolution.