

A trip down Greywater Lane

"Hey, Nate!" my client's voicemail sang. "We want to grow more vegetables in our backyard, so we need your advice. Oh, and we've got a privet we'd like to move. Give us a call. Thanks!"

I was curious. I hadn't been back to the Casa Solana project for years. After a 2003 change in New Mexico law that allowed for the non-permitted reuse of greywater in residential landscapes, we'd installed one of the first of these systems in the state. I remembered planting a swath of small New Mexico privets to soak up the greywater, but it was hard to imagine what might have become of the ground-breaking job.

Before the law changed, two types of "waste" — greywater (from bathroom sinks, showers, tubs, and washing machines) and blackwater (from toilets, kitchen sinks, and dishwashers) — had to be treated equally. The new law made an important distinction between the two potential resources and provided the following guidelines for watering plant

material and compost piles. Systems must not be sited in arroyos, and pipes should be clearly identified. Ponding and spraying of greywater are prohibited.

If stored, greywater must be kept at least five feet above the water table, and it cannot run off to a neighbor's property. Contact with people and pets should be minimized, while every distribution system requires an overflow into a sewer. Storage tanks are not encouraged, but tanks must be covered if used. Greywater must not be discharged to a watercourse, and its use must comply with local ordinances. Finally, no more than 250 gallons can be redirected per day.

The most critical step is to make sure that greywater is not stored and pumped. All wastewater will quickly turn septic if it is held in a tank for too long, so it's best to use gravity to quickly divert the nutrient-rich liquid to plants around a well-mulched swale. The one exception to this rule occurs when extremely hot water is being discharged from a washing

machine. In this case, a temporary surge tank can be used to prevent burning root systems.

Santa Fe Permaculture's first application of the new law had been a challenging one because the lot was small, and the back yard had almost no slope. Since pumps are avoided when moving gunk-filled greywater, it's nice if the property in question has a significant pitch. Lacking much slope, we invented a hybrid pumice-wick/greywater system that used homemade infiltrators created out of standard irrigation boxes. Clearly they worked well.

"So this is the privet we'd like to move," my client said. "Do you think we can do it?"

"Sure," I said. "We'll just have to call a crane service. That's by far the fastest-growing New Mexico privet that I've seen in my 19 years in business. It'd be cheaper to chop it down and plant a new one. Better yet, privets can take a hacking. Why not just prune the sucker way, way



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back?" I asked.

"Good point. We can do that," she replied.

"Great," I smiled as I rerouted the conversation to the real reason for my being there. "How 'bout them tomatoes?"

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