



Home Graywater Collection Systems

Town of Atherton
Building Department
91 Ashfield Road
Atherton, California 94027
Phone: (650) 752-0560
Inspection requests:
(650) 752-0542

What is graywater?

Graywater is untreated household wastewater generated from hand washing, laundry and bathing. This wastewater can be diverted from the sewer to irrigate outdoor plants and landscape. Graywater cannot include any wastewater from toilets, kitchen sinks, dishwashers or washing machines laundering soiled diapers or other sources of contamination such as darkrooms. Graywater cannot be stored for more than 24 hours and designed to dissipate the total amount of graywater on a daily basis. Graywater is different than potable tap water and requires specific measures for its safe reuse.

How graywater systems work:

Graywater systems directly reuse “wastewater” to irrigate plants. Do not use any detergents or bleaches in your sink, bath and laundry that may ultimately be harmful to your plants. To further ensure safety, graywater cannot be used on the edible portions of vegetables and must be used for sub-surface irrigation in order to reduce human contact or ponding. You cannot store graywater, only divert the amount needed on a daily basis for outdoor watering. All systems must be installed and maintained according to Chapter 16 of the California Plumbing Code.

Types of Graywater Systems:

There are three types of graywater systems that vary in complexity, volume of water produced and permitting requirements. In order to determine which system is right for you, you need to know your irrigation needs, including yard size, soil type, groundwater level and budget. The easiest, most low-tech system uses a washing machine and gravity to move laundry water directly out to the garden.

Clothes Washer System (no permit required*) Laundry-to-landscape systems divert graywater from the washing machine to your garden without cutting into existing plumbing. Washing machines have internal pumps which can be used to pump water directly out to the garden. No permit is required as long as no pump (other than the washing machine itself) or surge tank is used and as long as all code requirements are met.

*A permit shall not be required for a clothes washer system that does not cut or alter the existing plumbing piping as long as it is in compliance with the Graywater System Requirements (2013 California Plumbing Code Section 16). Clothes washer systems with a tank, a pump or modifications to the building plumbing will require a permit.



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Simple System (Less than 250 gallons a day): These systems include reusing water from a bathroom sink or shower. Simple systems require permits and involve altering plumbing and can include surge tanks and pumps. (Requires a building permit and approval from the San Mateo County Environmental Health)

Complex System (Greater than 250 gallons a day) These systems supply a large volume of water. Complex systems rely on pumps, surge tanks, filtration systems and are expensive to install and require ongoing maintenance. Complex systems must be designed by a qualified professional. (Requires a building permit and approval from the San Mateo County Environmental Health)

The San Mateo County Environmental Health Division does not allow treated stormwater or blackwater, as well as indoor use of (treated) gray water, to be used as non-potable water sources at the residential scale. Simple and Complex systems may also require a permit from San Mateo County Environmental Health.

Note: Storage tanks will require additional approval from the Town of Atherton Planning Department to meet all required setbacks.