

# Landscaping around utilities requires great care

By **Liz Gnecco**  
Master Gardener

Have you ever wondered what really is under the ground in regard to your utilities? Have you ever thought of what your maple tree roots might be doing to your septic system? What about that ornamental grass which someone planted right next to the above-ground utility box? Are you hoping to mask a utility with landscaping? Is your deck constructed over a drain field? Could there be an old well on your property?

## Garden Tales

You may not have thought of these, or similar questions, but you should. You may choose to ignore the issue but may pay a penalty later.

Imagine your electric line being girdled by tree roots and malfunctioning in the middle of summer. Not only will the cost to repair be on you, the discomfort of no air conditioning for an undetermined period is possible. The issue is similar in regard to the septic system. If trees and plants grow into the drain field, a malfunction is likely. The cost to repair is your responsibility. The safety hazards involved in ignoring utilities are the biggest cost for making such a choice.

Good design and well-considered placement of plants and hardscapes — those paved and hard-surface areas in your landscape — will curb these issues.

**Do a focused survey of your property.**

Make a record of your survey. Include items such as: water line location, all well locations, entire septic system location, including type of system, sewer line, underground tank storage unit, underground



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**When designing your landscape, keep in mind any underground utilities.**

cable and electric, electric box on house, electric dog fence, sprinkler system, underground gas line, public utility boxes and overhead utilities.

**Evaluate existing conditions.** If plantings are too close to some of these items, damage to a system can occur, easy access for maintenance is compromised, and sacrifice of plantings is likely.

In planning a landscape, the best choice is to plant nothing near a utility. It eliminates so many issues. If planting something or installing a hardscape outweighs the risk, know your systems and know your plantings and hardscapes.

**When it is time to start a project, call Miss Utility first.** "811" or visit [www.missutility.net](http://www.missutility.net). Make the call two to three days before digging will start. Expect markings to be accurate for 10 days. Painted lines will fade and flag markers can move. Keep in mind that Miss Utility's service includes marking of a public utility line's approximate location. Due to natural conditions, there can be some variance in the utility's exact location. Depth is not marked for the same reason.

Miss Utility advises to not dig over the marking and hand dig 2 feet out on each side of the marking. Private utilities are

not marked. A private company should be hired to assist in such a determination.

**Once the utilities are marked, be sure that you know how close you can do work around them.** Above-ground electric boxes need a clearance of 10 feet, generally. Septic systems are very sensitive. Only plant grass over top of a septic system. Keep everything else 10 feet away and then learn what can be done beyond the 10-foot range. When working over buried cables, removable hardscapes are a plus for future maintenance. Perennials and grasses are recommended for planting in the area. Buried propane tanks and lines require extreme caution. Protect well heads from mechanical damage.

**Safety is the first priority in dealing with utilities.** Future maintenance is the second priority. Design must be the third priority and be well considered to incorporate safety, maintenance, function, and beauty for many years to come.

*Editor's note: Liz Gnecco, a Magnolia resident, was a member of the Kent County Master Gardener class of 2009. She is a recent "transplant" from Pennsylvania and a third generation "plantaholic." For more information on this topic, she can be reached at [gnecco@live.com](mailto:gnecco@live.com).*

*For more information on the Master Gardener program, contact , DSU Home Horticulture Agent, at (302) 857-6426.*