

## In the Region

BACKYARD SAFETY

# What Lurks Beneath: Cesspools That Time Forgot

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Long Island, Westchester, Connecticut and New Jersey

FIVE days before Cecilia Hanlon was to hold her 45th birthday party last month with 65 guests in her backyard here, a gaping hole, about 10 feet in diameter and 12 feet deep, swallowed part of her patio and lawn.

“We are going to be dancing right there,” Ms. Hanlon said, watching as workers filled in the pit with stones and sand.

The area caved in after heavy rains during the northeaster of April 15, exposing an abandoned cesspool that Ms. Hanlon had not known existed. The home’s working septic system is in the front yard, she said, and the backyard cesspool did not appear on the home’s original 1936 plans.

“We had no indication that there was a sinkage,” said Ms. Hanlon, whose daughter Christina, 15, noticed the pit when she looked out the window the morning after the storm. Ms. Hanlon planned to cover the filled-in hole with plywood for the party. “It collapsed rather quickly,” she said. “It caved right in.”

Up to half a million homes on Long Island have cesspools, including 350,000 in Suffolk County, said Wendy Ladd, a spokeswoman for the Suffolk County department of health. Many have one or more brick or block cesspools more than 30 years old.

Most cesspool collapses on the Island occur in spring and fall, said Wayne Isaacson, installation manager for Citywide Sewer and Drain Service in Carle Place. He said that on a single day after the northeaster last month, he received nine calls about collapsed cesspools.

“It’s age,” Mr. Isaacson said. “They are most vulnerable to collapse when they are empty because there is no pressure on the walls.” Rainy weather is also a factor, especially after a fast thaw when moisture soaks the ground.

More attention needs to be paid to the dangers of aging cesspools, said Bernard Furshpan, a marketing executive from Bay Shore who moderated a seminar on cesspool awareness recently in Woodbury.

“We consider pools a serious hazard,” Mr. Furshpan said, referring to swimming pools. “That is why we put fences around them. At least we know that they are there. Cesspools exist without you knowing they are there. It’s not just regular water with chlorine. You are talking about poisons and toxins and acids that will burn you and kill you.”

Crumbling cesspools have led to tragedies. Last July, 76-year-old Ruth Cotgreave, of Huntington, was found dead in a hole 7 to 10 feet deep formed by a collapsed cesspool in her front yard. She had gone outside to plant in her flower bed.

“She had no idea of the imminent danger she was in,” said Susan Kennedy, her niece. “When her cesspool gave way, it literally swallowed her up.”

Three months earlier, when another Huntington cesspool gave way, a father, son and neighbor plunged into sewage up to their necks, but the police were able to rescue them before they drowned.

Jim vonMeier, a septic tank expert and environmentalist from Zimmerman, Minn., said the Island's cesspool troubles were not unique. "There are millions of homes all over the country that have old cesspools" in danger of collapse, Mr. vonMeier said. "Cesspools were only meant to be used for five to seven years until sewage treatment facilities could be built. Unfortunately, things don't always go according to plan."

Even owners of older homes connected to a sewer line should not be sanguine. Thousands of abandoned cesspools are hidden and deteriorating underground, he said.

In 1972 the Suffolk County health department required that all new cesspools be built of steel-reinforced precast concrete. In residential systems, a septic tank catches solids and liquid waste in watertight tanks about 12 feet deep and 8 feet in diameter. One or more overflow pools — cesspools — work as seepage pits through which liquids drain into the ground.

When Martin and Linda Clarke bought their home in Manhasset six years ago, they contacted several septic system contractors, assuming their cesspool was old and needed to be replaced. Workers scoured their yard, poking holes with metal spears.

"They kept hitting rocks," Ms. Clarke recalled. "They couldn't find it." Worried about a backup and to avoid overburdening the system, they had their system serviced from inside the house with chemicals and sent their laundry out rather than using the washing machine.

The cesspool was located only when it buckled one evening during the recent rains, leaving a cavernous pit, overhung with grass and tree roots, next to the swing set in their backyard.

"It's a horror show," Ms. Clarke said. But she was also counting her blessings. If the cesspool had not collapsed until morning, "it's very likely my kids would have been running right across it." Because there has been no sewage odor, the Clarkes still do not know whether there is more than one hidden cesspool on the property.

David Mejias, a Nassau County legislator who attended the recent press conference, said aging cesspools were a major problem for older suburbs. While some mortgage companies ask for certification that cesspools are working, they do not require an underground inspection. Mr. Mejias said he would investigate the feasibility of requiring homeowners to show on a survey where their cesspools are when a home changes hands.

He added, "Most people change their kitchens or bathrooms three or four times over 30 years, but they never even think about the dangers that their cesspools pose to them and their neighbors."