

# Fact Sheet: Tree roots and sewer pipes: a growing concern

**Western Water is always working to prevent sewage spills that can affect our environment and waterways, as well as pose a public health problem.**

Most sewer blockages and spills are caused by tree roots finding their way into our sewer pipes.

Trees are a big part of our suburban and semi-rural lifestyle, providing shade, beauty and habitat for our wildlife.

But what's happening underground can be a different story. Some trees and plants have vigorous root systems that can cause sewer blockages and overflows if they have been planted too close to sewer and stormwater pipes.

## What happens when a sewer overflows?

When a sewer pipe becomes blocked, sewage backs up and can overflow.

If the blockage is on your property this can mean sewage overflowing into your toilet, bathroom or laundry. Other overflows can occur into waterways or onto parks or footpaths.

## How tree roots can block pipes

A tree's root system will seek out the nutrients and water needed for its survival.

If there is a tiny fracture or gap in your sewer or stormwater pipe (commonly from ground movement or pipe joints), fine hair-like roots can penetrate the cracks looking for moisture.

Once inside, these tiny roots can grow into a mass, blocking and damaging the pipes and causing messy sewage spills.

## Who is responsible for repairing damaged pipes?

If roots have blocked or damaged sewer pipes on your property, you are responsible for any repairs. A licensed plumber can clear pipes, and give you advice on the best way to stop the problem recurring.

This may involve repairing the pipes, and/or removing the tree. Tree roots that have entered sewerage pipes once are likely to do so again. Cutting back roots can actually encourage them to grow, in the same way pruning a tree encourages it to grow back.

## What can I do to avoid pipe damage?

The best way is to prevent tree roots from getting into the sewer and storm-water system in the first place.

If you are planning on planting a tree:

- First, find out where the sewer pipes are located on your property. Ring Western Water on 1300 650 422 for a property sewer plan. A small fee applies.
- Then choose your tree carefully. Ask your local nursery for advice on the root structure and habits of the trees you are considering. Plants and trees indigenous to your area are often a good choice, as they are adapted to local conditions.

There is a list of potential problem trees in below

- Finally, choose your planting site, avoiding areas on or close to sewer pipes. As a general rule tree roots extend about 1.5 times the length of the tree's branches. It is a good idea to get professional advice on garden design where possible.

## Some problem species to be avoided

Bamboos	Phyllostchus species
Cape Virgilla	Virgilia oroboides
Elms	Ulmus species
Figs	Ficus species
Golden Ash	Fraxinus excelsior 'Aurea'
Golden Wattle	Acacia pycnantha
Gum Trees	Eucalytus species
Hibiscus	Hibiscus species
Lilly Pilly	Acmena smithii
Mirror Plant	Coprosma repens
Peppercorn Tree	Schinus molle
Plane Tree	Platanus species
Pine Trees	Pinus species
Poplars	Populus species
Prickly Paperbark	Melaleuca styphelioides
Silver Birch	Betula pendula
Weeping Lilly Pilly	Eugenia ventenatii
Willows	Salix species

The following lists nominate suitable tree species, which still need to be planted at least 2m-4m away from a sewer pipe. Please be aware that these plants are provided as a guide only. For further information please contact your local nursery or visit [www.ourwater.vic.gov.au](http://www.ourwater.vic.gov.au) for further advice.

### Suitable species - no closer than 2m

Box-Leaved Wattle	Acacia buxifolia
Crepe Myrtle	Lagerstroemia indica
Crimson Bottlebrush	Callistemon citrinus
Emu Bush	Eremophila longifolia
Evergreen Spindle Tree	Euomyzus japonica
Flowering Apple	Malus species
Heath Banksia	Banksia occidentalis
Jacaranda	Jacaranda mimosifolia
Kurrajong	Brachychiton populneus
Sycamore	Acer pseudoplatanus
Liquidambar	Liquidambar styraciflua
Long-leaved Box	Eucalyptus gonicalyx
Old Man Saltbush	Atriplex nummularia
'Rosea' Pink Marri	Eucalyptus calophylla
White Silver Birch	Betula pendula (B.alba)

### Suitable species - no closer than 4m

Arglye Apple	Eucalyptus cinerea
Bracelet Honeymyrtle	Melaleuca armillaris
Chinese Wisteria	Wisteria sinensis
Golden Wreath Wattle	Acacia saligna
Pagoda Tree	Sophora Japonica
Prickly Paperbark	Melaelaleuca stypheliooides
Silver Birch	Betula pendula
Smooth Barked Apple	Angophora costata
Rowan	Sorbus aucuparia
Weeping Myall or Boree	Acacia pendula
Willow Myrtle	Agonis flexuosa



Distance to plant tree and shrub species from drains and sewers

### Further information

For account enquiries, please call Western Water on **1300 650 422**.

For further information on Western Water's service charges or concessions and rebates please call **1300 650 422** or visit [www.westernwater.com.au](http://www.westernwater.com.au)

Rights and responsibilities of residential landlords and tenants:

Consumer Affairs Victoria

Telephone **1300 558 181** or visit [www.consumer.vic.gov.au](http://www.consumer.vic.gov.au)

Rights and responsibilities of commercial landlords and tenants (small business):

Victorian Business Line

Telephone **13 22 15** or visit [www.businessaccess.vic.gov.au](http://www.businessaccess.vic.gov.au)