

Fact sheet: The problem with tree roots

How tree roots damage pipes

A tree's roots supply it with the food and water needed to survive. In their search for nourishment, tree roots will often enter sewer pipes, where moisture and nutrients are readily available.

Tree roots can find their way into sewer pipes through even the smallest pipe fracture. Ground movement, heavy loads or broken or ill-fitting pipe joints can cause these fractures. Once the tiny hair roots find a fracture and enter a pipe, they are likely to grow and spread. The roots often damage the pipes and can obstruct flows resulting in blockages and sewer spills. In fact, tree and shrub roots are the cause of most sewer blockages.

If this problem occurs in your private sewer pipes, it is your responsibility to have it fixed.

Avoiding pipe damage

To reduce root damage, avoid vegetation that is likely to cause problems, and choose the best locations to plant trees in your garden.

When selecting new trees for your garden, look for trees and shrubs that are native to the region. They have been growing in the area for many years and have adapted to local conditions.

Ask your local nursery professional for advice about the root structure and habits of the trees you are considering. They will be able to assist you in choosing the most appropriate trees, and advise on those you should avoid planting in the vicinity of pipes.

There are no defined rules about which trees cause problems and how far trees should be planted from pipes, as circumstances vary between properties and regions. To assist your choice, some problem species are listed below. These trees require particular care when deciding where to plant.

Before planting a tree, you should also find out where the sewer pipes are located in your garden, so you can stay clear of them. As a guide, mature roots usually extend underground about one and a half times the distance of the adult tree's branches.

If you do not have a plan of your property showing the type and location of sewer pipes, Western Water can assist you with this information. A small fee is applicable to this service.

Repairing pipe damage

If roots have blocked your private sewer pipes, you are responsible for any repairs and you will need to arrange for a licensed plumber to clear the pipes. As well as removing the roots, you should consider fixing the damage to stop roots re-entering the pipe, thereby minimising future problems and expense. Your plumber can recommend the best solution for your particular problem.

Sometimes trees planted too close to Western Water's main sewer system may need to be removed completely. The main sewers service a number of properties and are protected by easements. Trees should not be planted directly over main sewers.

Some problem species

Most large trees and many shrubs may cause problems if they are planted close to sewers. The following list identifies some of the common culprits that cause sewer blockages, however this is by no means complete. Before planting a tree or shrub we recommend that you speak with your nursery before making your final tree selection.

Common name	Botanical name
Bamboos	<i>Phyllostachus</i>
Cape Virgilia	<i>Virgilia oroboides</i>
Elms	<i>Ulmus</i>
Fig	<i>Ficus</i>
Golden Ash	<i>Fraxinus excelsior 'Aurea'</i>
Golden Wattle	<i>Acacia pycnantha</i>
Gum Trees	<i>Eucalyptus</i>
Hibiscus	<i>Hibiscus speciosus</i>
Lilly Pilly	<i>Eugenia smithii</i>
Mirror Plant	<i>Coprosma repens</i>
Peppercorn Tree	<i>Schinus molle</i>
Pine Trees	<i>Pinus</i>
Poplars	<i>Populus</i>
Prickly Paperbark	<i>Melaleuca styphelioides</i>
Silver Birch	<i>Betula pendula</i>
Weeping Lilly Pilly	<i>Eugenia ventenatii</i>
Willows	<i>Salix</i>

For further information

Contact Western Water on 1300 650 425
or visit our website at www.westernwater.com.au