

# TAKING COMPOST TO THE NEXT LEVEL

EVER CONSIDERED A COMPOST  
OR COMPOSTING TOILET? IT'S NOT AS CRAZY  
AS IT MAY SOUND.

BY STEPHANIE BOUCHARD



As communities here in Maine and elsewhere struggle with disposing of septic waste and how to conserve water, composting human waste through the use of compost toilets or composting toilets offer individuals (and businesses) a simple way to contribute to easing those challenges.

“Everybody should be thinking about the drinking water that they’re flushing down their toilets and what we can do to make a better system,” says Bob Harden, store manager of The Green Store in Belfast. “When you compost, you’re making organic material available for plants and trees. When you flush your toilet, you’re making toxic waste.”

Composting food waste is one thing, you might be thinking, but poop and pee? It’s not as crazy as it may sound. Composting human excrement actually goes back to ancient times, and if done right (that means it needs to get hot enough to kill dangerous bacteria), it’s safe enough to use in your garden.

Compost toilets or composting toilets (there’s a difference, explained below) take a variety of forms. You can build your own or buy a commercially produced product. Some look like standard toilets, some are simply a five-gallon plastic bucket with a tight-fitting lid. Some need electricity, but many don’t. Most don’t use water, but some do use a minimal amount. Some separate feces and urine, while others combine them. Some cost less than a standard toilet, while others cost thousands,

and putting in a whole house system can be tens of thousands of dollars.

A compost toilet is a receptacle that holds your waste, combined with a covering material, such as sawdust. You empty your receptacle, such as a five-gallon plastic bucket, into an outdoor compost pile or bin that contains other materials for composting, such as leaves and plants and food waste. It “cooks” for about a year. This process is often referred to as making humanure.

A self-contained composting toilet does the composting within the unit itself. You add a bulking material, such as coconut husks, and an accelerator to hasten the speed of the composting process, which takes place within the unit, but not within the toilet bowl. When the composting process is complete, you remove the finished compost from the unit.

Which system is best for you depends on how hands-on you want to be, your physical environment and your budget. State and local regulations typically allow for alternative toilet systems, but you should check with your specific community before making any purchases.

For Masanobu Ikemiya the decision to go the humanure route not only aligned with the permaculture he and his wife, Tomoko, practice at their home in Bar Harbor, but harkened back to his youth in Japan, where the local farmers paid residents for their pee and poo to make humanure to fertilize their fields. “Humanure is the best compost,” he says.

Their compost toilet was originally in a small wood shed outside their home but when the couple began living there year-round they moved it into the house. “At the beginning,” he says, “my wife was kind of skeptical.” She was particularly worried about smells. With a little fine-tuning of the bathroom, he says, smell hasn’t been an issue.

The Ikemiyas have used their humanure system, based on the description in Joe Jenkins’s book, “The Humanure Handbook,” for more than 20 years, and

in recent years have given a presentation on humanure composting at Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association’s (MOFGA) Common Ground Fair.

“We are a living example of how it really works and makes our soil rich,” he says. “It’s wonderful.”

