



# My Experience Mastering Composting Toilets

## A second option for the disposal of waste

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Photo by Tim Brandt.

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Who hasn't got a personal toilet story? Crappy humour has plugged humanity for eons. I grew up experiencing some rustic outhouses and have had some plunging good times during a few shitty janitor jobs. Yep, I've faced the feces for five decades but it's only in these last few years that I've made doing our business a personal education.

My partner and I share an old two-storey home in Fort Rouge. The main floor's back porch has a very small washroom with a flush toilet but every winter we have had to turn off the water to that room because of cold temperatures freezing its pipes. Our second floor has the bathroom, which we left as the previous owners had decorated it, for our first dozen years here. However, we gradually became tired of the wallpaper, the homemade vanity shelves, and the smelly old flush toilet.

During those years we became fanatical gardeners in our back and front yards, using grey water from the tub and washing machine to water our fruit perennials and veggies. Giving up private car ownership meant we could convert our back lane parking spot to a prime vegetable garden bed. We have a freezer for preserving our own produce, so when our kitchen fridge blew out some years ago, we just removed the motor and used it as a large icebox with frozen two-litre water bottles rotating from freezer to "fridge."

We also installed a highly efficient furnace and a wood-burning fireplace insert, with a fan that heats our living room for much of the winter. So, when that smelly old upstairs toilet became leaky over the winter four years ago we decided it was time to replace it with a composting model.

We researched and priced out the suitable self-contained models. In June 2011, we renovated the bathroom by removing everything to make way for the big white throne – the US \$1,645 Sun-Mar Excel NE. It is designed for two adults or a family of three so we felt it could handle us with occasional guests. The seat is 30 inches from the floor—compared to 15 inches for a standard toilet—sitting atop a large drum, which is atop a finishing drawer.

The unit comes with a small two-legged step which hooks onto the front, hiding the drawer and allowing an average person to step up and turn before sitting down on the throne.

There is a tiny electric fan somewhere inside which is always purring, drying the waste and pushing the vapour out and up the vent pipe. There is no smell!

The best part of the installation process was punching a hole in the side of the old furnace chimney, gluing together sections of provided PVC vent pipe, feeding it up to the roof, and capping it. If you know what to look for, you can always tell that the toilet fan is working when you're out back because you can look up at the chimney and see a slight movement in the leaves hanging near it.

Not included with the toilet unit but highly recommended were Sun-Mar's composting aid products: "Compost Sure" bulking material containing a mix of peat moss and hemp stalk—we get high on the throne—which is added with a scoop for every poop; "Compost Quick" spray, which is an enzyme solution added every second day before cranking the drum 36 times; and the "Microbe Mix," a powder added to the drum every two weeks.

In place of the "Compost Quick" spray, I sometimes just use baking soda and water, but we still buy the other products to ensure timely decomposing. As soon as we had the unit installed and understood the basic steps in daily use, I sat down to study the manual. We've heard that things can go wrong, horribly wrong, if you don't follow through.

I am very proud of our throne. My partner has made a few crowns which hang on the wall nearby so that each user can feel royal. We've replaced the supplied plastic step with a full wraparound wooden deck for more comfortable access and for a full magazine rack, so we can reach books and other items from the toilet. It's all very comfortable and pretty regal.

And then the after-chores begin. We mix some dry bulk, such as sawdust, with water in a little pail, and put a scoop in the drum on top of the poo. There is nothing extra to do if it's just pee. However, we have to watch our volumes.

During our first winter we had a major party and everyone wanted to try out the new toilet. Everyone was drinking so there was a lot of pee.

It was quite a bit of work cleaning out the bottom drawer and the evaporation chamber, which is the area behind and below the drawer. Now there is a calendar on the wall above the throne and that's where I keep track of when to turn the drum, when to add the "Microbe Mix," when I've emptied the drum into the drawer, and when it's time to take the drawer outside.

Also, there is a shelf above the throne where I keep the manual, the Microbe Mix, and a flashlight for checking levels in the drum, the patented "Bio-drum." Talk about making one's personal business "the business!"

Some people are a little grossed out by using it or hearing about it but maybe they just don't get the whole Zen concept. I actually enjoy raking our shit, with the little plastic rake that came with our "Excel" – because I know there is something I am good at taking care of.