

Yes, Civilized People DO Have Composting Toilets In Their Homes



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[Design / Bathroom Design](#)

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When I first started talking about the idea of going "off-pipe" and [bringing composting toilets into our homes](#), commenters scoffed, saying "*Composting toilets are NEVER going to make it into the main stream market. Debating it is silly.*" and "*No one will want this inside their house. I know this, because I still have a few teeth in my head and a few friends in town.*" But lots of people do; last year I stayed in Laurence Grant's house near St. Thomas, Ontario, which has a composting toilet as its only facility. I recently asked him how long he had been using it and when he said "seventeen years", I asked him to write about the experience.

See also: [More Hot Poop on Composting and Alternative Toilets](#)



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Sun-Mar composting toilet installation, April, 2012. The wooden box at the back is a decorative copper lined tank from an old flush toilet. The round container on the floor is for bulking material used in the toilet.

For 17 years now, this old house has handled significant body functions through a composting toilet. At one point I added a urinal out of convenience, at least to the males. These means of dealing with what is usually

considered human “waste” have worked well and alleviated the worry over saturated drainage from septic systems, unnecessary use of water, and the sense that the “waste” was unnecessarily going to waste.

My frame house was built in 1848 in a Classical Revival style. Up to the late 1940s, outhouses were moved around in the backyard, filling the holes dug for them. A revolution came following the Second World War when pumps and electricity made it possible to have running water inside, pumped from the backyard well. A corner of the kitchen became the new bathroom, with toilet and sink. Baths were taken in a portable galvanized tub in the kitchen. Water was heated as it ran through a gas burner. The septic tank consisted of an oil drum connected to a series of buried concrete rings from which the water drained into the backyard. The drum was replaced in the 1970s by a concrete vault. This was the set-up when I bought the house in 1982.

During the rainy seasons of the late fall and spring, drainage was a worry. The water table in Iona is high and “perched” (a heavy layer of blue clay beneath the sandy loam impedes drainage). There was always a concern whether the toilet would flush, and conversely, during the dry season, whether there would be water to flush it. When one spring I had the septic tank drained, it filled overnight with excess water from the backyard. I began considering other solutions.



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Betsy Apel (left) and Belle Smith, circa 1930. For over 30 years they used the outhouse which was moved about the backyard. Belle met her end falling while moving slops to the outhouse.

A renovation in the mid 1990s provided an opportunity. A distant relation (my grandfather’s cousin’s nephew’s aunt) had owned the house from 1903 to 1938 when she retired as secretary to a Chicago doctor, who was her nephew. It was easy then to take the Michigan Central train from Iona Station, 3 km. to the north, to Chicago, Detroit or New York. Belle Smith owned a car and needed a place for it. Belle had a hole cut in the back of the house and turned a bedroom into a garage. My plan was to turn it back into a bedroom, plus water closet (or non water closet) and furnace room. My grandfather’s cousin had advised, “have a bedroom downstairs for you old age”.

I had read about composting toilets in a magazine. There was one model available in a St. Thomas hardware store - the Sun-Mar XL. It had the merit of being made in Canada and had a larger capacity due to a ventilating fan. At the time the cost was \$1,300. Although concerned about the reaction of visitors to not “flushing it all away”, I bought and installed one. My plumber was convinced I would change my mind and installed a drainage pipe for a standard toilet just the same. His father, whom I knew, had installed the plumbing in the house in the 1940s.

In all these years I’ve had few problems. I had to replace the fan twice. Once the drainage screen was blocked by peat moss and excess moisture accumulated in the drum (for information on how these toilets work, visit www.sun-mar.com). I also switched to Sun-Mar’s “Compost Sure Green”, a mixture of peat and hemp, as a replacement for peat moss, which I found dusty with a tendency to clump. When the drum has enough accumulated compost, it is emptied into a tray below, where the composting action continues. When it is time, I empty the tray into my compost area in the backyard, where it accelerates the composting of the kitchen and garden materials. In the spring, I start a new compost pile by shoveling the un-composted material at the top onto another pile (which is all held in place by a circle of page wire fencing) revealing the compost which is ready to distribute over the vegetable garden.

There are occasionally odors, but I light a candle to dissipate them. I think they have more to do with atmospheric conditions and the strength of the draft. If there is occasionally a “smell”, it is an earthy one. Only once did someone refuse to use it, but that was their discomfort. There is also never any splash back.

Laurence Grant has lived in Iona, Ontario, for the past 30 years. He was raised in nearby Frome and St. Thomas, is an avid vegetable gardener, likes to attract birds to his half acre through a naturalized landscape and retired last year as a wage earner in the cultural field. He has four cats who have their own litter box.

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