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Toilet technology is a burning topic (sometimes literally) in the woods – even for the Governor-General

In cottage life, up to your waste

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THE VACATIONIST

By the end of my second week at the cottage in this Scorching Summer of the Universal Ear Infection, I had reduced my mental capacity to that of a paramecium — the dolt of the bacterial world, and one of the simplest organisms known to man. I was oozing back to Nature, to a pre-Blackberried, pre-civilized, Swamp Thing mindlessness.

Only one subject snapped me out of my holiday hypnosis, and it wasn't the news this week that the U.S. and Australia have further repudiated the Kyoto Accord. No, what snapped my stupor was toilet technology. Even at its most gracious, over whisky after a magnificent dinner on the screened-in porch overlooking the family inheritance on Lake Awappadongchik, all conversation in cottage and cabin country these days ends up (so to speak) at the crapper — in a war between four toilet "technologies," each with its neuroses and fetishes.

1. The outhouse. The most primitive and primal outdoor toilet technology. A hole in the ground, emptied regularly, or merely limed. Having to sprinkle chlorides over you droppings only reminds you of all the other people whose hands used the sprinkling cup (*ew*). Users fear the presence of biting rodents below the hole, and the absence of locking doors and toilet seats above. There's no running water, which ensures an inevitable delay in one's return to a sanitary state: You have to walk back to the cottage and find the antiseptic soap before you touch anything, even a child on fire. As a result, *no one completely trusts anyone else in a cottage or cabin with an outhouse.*

Then there's the fundamental problem with an outhouse: It doesn't flush. Flushing preserves the illusion of our sanctity. The outhouse — even a "long drop" outhouse (the longer the better, the height of Victoria Falls being ideal) — does not. But some people don't have these hang-ups.

"The perfect outhouse in the perfect location, say looking at Mount Assiniboine in the Rockies on a cloudless moonlit night, door open?" Candace Wilson, a painter and cottager and outhouser on Georgian Bay told me recently. "I think you commune with nature. I just love going outside. Nothing beats it."

And the more crowded cottage country gets, the more overbuilt the shoreline becomes, the more reverse snob appeal outhouses have. A high-end Muskokan of my acquaintance is planning a new cabin, and intends to equip it with nothing more than a hole in the ground. He drives a $20,000 boat and owns a $3-million cottage with a working septic tile bed. But he's building an outhouse.

2. Tile beds/holding tanks. A vaguely understood maze of tiles and pipes through which bad stuff leaches harmlessly into the soil, where it can boost the fruit in the raspberry patch. (Not a metaphor.) This allows flushing, but at great expense (up to $40,000), and is why the grass is so green and moist down there by the side verandah. An ecologically mindful method of disposal (though some dispute this), provided your cottage isn't sitting on a chunk of Canadian Shield granite. In that case, you need a holding tank, which is emptied each fall by barge — a practice non-septic devotees deem "horrific."

3. The Incinerating Toilet (a.k.a. the Incinolet). For the daring. Theoretically speaking, user turns on an electric coil, places a conical wax paper filter into a conical stainless-steel bowl suspended over said coil, and therein downloads. Once finished, user stands up and depresses a foot pedal; toilet bowl opens (theoretically) whereupon wax paper cone drops (theoretically) into red-hot incinerating ring and, theoretically, burns up. "Smoke" goes up chimney.

While more commendable than piping sewage into the bay, the entire process requires electricity, and can be nerve-wracking. A friend once described it as "going to the bathroom into a Melitta coffee filter perched on top of a nuclear reactor." She dealt with the prospect of using the Incinolet by not going to the bathroom for three days.

But for Incinolet fans, the intensity of the experience is part of the thrill. Gillian Frise, a cottage owner in Go Home Bay, south of Parry Sound, retired her Incinolet last summer after 20 years of service — "which the company told us was the longest any Incinolet had ever been in use," she volunteered. That a cottage owner would know this is what I'm talking about when I say cottage people are obsessed with this sh. . . — I mean, stuff.

But she replaced it with a composting toilet. "The problem with the Incinolet was that the foot pedal got stuck, and you had to use these huge sticks to push your poo down," Ms. Frise explained, much too enthusiastically.

Then there was the noise, which resembled the alien horns in Steven Speilberg's *War of the Worlds*. "People were sleeping, then there was this huge noise — *annnnnnnnnnggggghhh*. I mean, we also loved it, because of the drama. You saw flames come up in the toilet bowl when you pushed the foot pedal. It excited our guests."

4. The composting toilet. The hot technology, beloved of islanders, literary types and the ecologically concerned. John Fraser, Master of Massey College at the University of Toronto, owns one, as does Margaret Atwood. Even Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson describes herself as "totally and utterly an evangelist" for her 11-year-old composting throne at her rocky two-acre Georgian Bay island, which has neither electricity nor hot water. (Last week her husband, the writer John Ralston Saul, gave the minister of the interior of Bhutan some pamphlets for the Canadian-made Sun-Mar composting toilet, a paragon in the industry.)

Yes, Her Excellency is completely familiar with the composting process, which takes place in a rotatable drum beneath the bowl.

(Perched high on a composting toilet, you feel like you're doing your business on a homecoming float riding down Main Street. But you feel so righteous, you deserve to be in a parade anyway.)

Regular infusions of fresh bread, microbe mix and spray-in enzymes go into the drum, along with a cup of peat moss a day per user. "You usually time it to your major event," Ms. Clarkson explained. The drum is rotated every few days, she added, and "in three to four weeks, you have completely black earth." Mr. Saul then removes the freshly minted loam from the so-called "finishing" tray.

"What can I say," Her Excellency added, "except that it's deeply satisfying."

What amazes me is that these details are discussed so openly. I find it bracing — even firming. Squeamishness has never had a place in Canada's backwoods mythology: Susanna Moodie described her toilet habits in *Roughing It in the Bush* in the 1880s, while Lady Pellatt, having promised to transform Girl Guides into proper society matrons, instead taught them to shoot and fight and pee in the woods.

"The first time I pulled the drawer out of our composting toilet, I thought I might faint," John Fraser recalled. "And I'd been in China and seen the night-soil carts."

Night-soil gatherers there, he went on to say, were the lowest of the low. Today in Canada, the Governor-General rotates her own waste, and it's considered chic. This has to be progress.

To cottagers such as Ms. Frise, the rewards are psychological as well. "I love the outhouse," she told me. "I love that it's a separate building, and the solitude. And that you have to *say* you're going, so people don't make the walk while you're there." She paused, and thought for a moment. "I think the freedom to talk about poop has been good for us," she concluded. "Made us less anal."

Less anal. Nothing wrong with that. Or more anal, if need be. Life in the wealthy, wasteful west is so much like a holiday, we need to be reminded of necessities: Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and you gotta go when you gotta go. Some things on this earth don't take a vacation.

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