

# introduction

This course covers the building and maintenance of a variety of compost loos – indoors and outdoors, at a smallholding in Somerset and an intentional community in Buckinghamshire. The instructions assume only basic DIY skills. Everyone should be able to follow them. Let us know if there you find anything unclear.

If aliens were to land on this planet, and we were to try and explain to them the way we live on earth, amongst all the crazy things that we as a species get up to, perhaps one of the most difficult to explain would be the process of expending vast amounts of time, energy and money producing and delivering pure, precious drinking water to all homes (in the West anyway), only for people to crap in it, thereby destroying two scarce resources at the same time, and causing disposal and pollution problems in the process.

Crazy as this is, of all the Lowimpact.org topics, this one causes the most mirth. When we attend events, most people look at our information boards and make interested noises about solar hot water, biodiesel or straw-bale building, but chuckle when they come to compost loos and say, ‘no way’, or ‘I can just see my mother using one of those when she comes to visit!’

Having said that, there are lots of people who have seen the light. We ran a compost toilets workshop at the ‘Big Green Gathering’ one year at 9am on Sunday morning. I trudged over to the yurt where the talk was to be held, rubbing my eyes, and not expecting anyone in their right mind to be there, only to find that around 50 people had turned up.

I'd say that a well-designed compost toilet is the pinnacle of sustainable sewage treatment, and especially when combined with a waterless urinal (preferably draining onto a straw-bale to produce compost) and a reed bed and pond to cope with liquid wastes and to provide water for a garden.

Crapping into drinking water, and flushing it away to be dealt with at a sewage plant is a terrible idea, and very expensive. But it fits the typical modern lifestyle very well. People work 50 hours per week in order to earn as much money as possible, and have no time to think about alternatives to wasteful and environmentally-damaging aspects of their lives. As long as it is quick and easy, and you don't have to think about it too much, most people are happy. Those people don't have time for gardening either, with their busy careers, and so have no need for compost anyway. You of course are not interested in this type of lifestyle. You want to work part-time so that you have enough time to install and maintain renewable energy systems, produce some of your own food, maybe build your own house using natural materials, spend time with friends and family, and of course install a compost loo. This will then mean that you don't have to work 50 hours a week to maintain an expensive lifestyle, and you will find yourself on a healthier, happier path, rather than the unhealthy, consumerist, environmentally-damaging path promoted by the advertising industry, and unthinkingly embarked upon by most people in the West.



*Compost toilet in use: the 'throne' sits on top of the chamber. Note the bucket for sawdust, steps up to platform, vent from chamber through roof and above gutter-line, instructions on wall and waterless urinal in the foreground.*

This is why we want to help people build and install compost toilets which are comfortable, indoors, odour-free, and generally 'mother-friendly' (i.e. wouldn't scare your mother too much). My mother wouldn't dream of using a compost loo, let alone peak-knocking (see 'use and maintenance') or emptying one. But then again she wouldn't be reading this either. Some people are up for it and others aren't. The fact that you are reading this probably means that you are.

This course is also about the general principles of compost toilets and how they work, the environmental benefits, plus a description of, and instructions on how to build, a basic one.

We also outline more 'hands-on' ways of dealing with human waste, and although these are the lowest impact of all, generally, people don't want to know. That is the great thing about modern WCs and sewerage systems - you don't need to get more involved with your waste than just flushing it away and cleaning the toilet.

We would obviously like as many people as possible to install and use compost toilets, and so the ideas in this course shouldn't gross-out the uninitiated too much. It is about as low-impact as you can get, and still (maybe) persuade your mother to use.

They work well, are cheap and relatively easy to build and maintain yourself. We can guarantee that if you build and use a compost toilet properly you'll end up with crumbly compost that is indistinguishable in texture, smell, and taste (only joking) to the bag compost that you can buy at any garden centre.

You can buy a proprietary compost loo, but there are problems. If you go for a compact and relatively cheap one, they usually use quite a lot of electricity to dry out the liquids from the waste, and the general consensus is that they are too flimsy and unreliable; or you can go for a big sturdy model, but then the problems involve finding room for it, and the high cost. So we recommend building your own.

For me there is a deep satisfaction in being integrated into the land and environment in which we live. We are warmed by fires burning logs that grew here, eating organic food that grew here, giving food scraps to chickens which give us eggs, their bedding and waste goes onto the compost heap, compost goes onto the garden, and even our own waste goes to the soil around fruit trees, which give us delicious fruit and juices. Not everyone feels the same way, especially about compost toilets, but the more people see well-maintained compost toilets in operation, the more they will become accepted and their undoubted benefits will be better understood. Ecotourism is an excellent way to promote compost toilets as well as a whole range of other eco-friendly technologies. Then people can be introduced to them when on holiday and having a good time, and just maybe they will think about incorporating them into their everyday lives when they get home.

I have used the term 'human waste' above as shorthand for faeces and urine. Many writers on sustainable sewerage systems refuse to use the term 'waste' as it is in fact a valuable resource. I acknowledge this, and only use the term because it is useful shorthand, and it refers to the fact that they are waste products of human digestion.

If you intend to build and install your own compost toilet, remember that a badly-maintained or smelly compost toilet can undo the work of 100 good ones, so try to make it as comfortable and attractive as possible, and keep it clean and well-maintained. This will help to spread the word. Good luck!