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Humanure: Goodbye, Toilets. Hello, Extreme Composting

By Adam Fisher

For more than a decade, 57-year-old roofer and writer Joseph Jenkins has been advocating that we flush our toilets down the drain and put a bucket in the bathroom instead. When a bucket in one of his five bathrooms is full, he empties it in the compost pile in his backyard in rural Pennsylvania. Eventually he takes the resulting soil and spreads it over his vegetable garden as fertilizer.

"It's an alternative sanitation system," says Jenkins, "where there is no waste." His 255-page *Humanure Handbook: A Guide to Composting Human Manure* is in its third edition and has been translated into five languages, but it has only recently begun to catch on. His message? Human manure, when properly managed, is odorless. His audience? Ecologically committed city dwellers who are looking to do more for the earth than just sort their trash or ride a bike to work. ([See reusable toilet wipes as one of the top 10 odd environmental ideas.](#))

"It's one of those life-changing books," says Erik Knutzen, 44, an eco-blogger in Los Angeles. "You read it, and the lightbulb just goes on." Now he eschews his porcelain potty for a big bucket with a toilet seat. He "flushes" by tossing in a scoop of sawdust, which not only neutralizes smells but also helps speed the breakdown of material for compost. Like many back-to-basics sophisticates, he believes Jenkins' humanure system is more sanitary and more rational than the conventional alternative. "Human waste is a perfectly good source of an important resource, nitrogen," Knutzen observes. "Water is a valuable resource too. Why mix the two and turn all of it into a problem?"

Wastewater treatment is much more energy-intensive than composting, which needs little more than time (about a year) for complete decomposition and pathogen elimination. In Austin, Texas, a sustainably minded nonprofit called the Rhizome Collective succeeded this year in getting the city to approve what may be the first legal composting toilet in the U.S. "The hypocrisy is amazing," says Lauren Ross, 54, a civil engineer involved in Rhizome's four-year battle to get a permit. "The city will buy you a low-flow toilet, but they'll fight you all the way if you want to build one that uses no water at all."

It's an idea that you, dear reader, might be asked to take seriously. Not long ago, Nance Klehm, 44, a self-described radical ecologist in Chicago, invited her neighbors to stop using their toilets and start saving their poop. More than half of them — 22 of the 35 households — accepted her proposal. In three months she picked up 1,500 gal. (5,700 L) of excrement, which she'll give back to participants this spring after she and Mother Nature have transformed it into a rich bag of fertilizer. "I've sent a sample in for a coliform test," Klehm says. "There is zero detectable fecal bacteria." ([Read a brief history of toilets.](#))

At one point, Klehm invited her "nutrient loopers" to a potluck and was surprised to see who had agreed to participate. "It was the white collar people, not the ragtag anarchists. Mostly, they were delighted that they got this wacky proposal," she says. "They didn't know how to connect with the earth, but they could s___ in a bucket."

Meanwhile, over in California, the Marin Composting Portable Odorless Outhouse Project, a.k.a. MCPOOP, is doing Klehm one better. The goal of MCPOOP (which is pronounced the Irish way as opposed to the rap-star way) is to get the government into the night-soil business and put humanure toilets in county parks and town squares. The group is less than a month old but already has the support of the local environmental establishment and Marin County supervisor Steve Kinsey. "The whole thing is like a good acid flashback," says Kinsey. "We approved several experimental permits like this in the '70s." He estimates that a small-scale municipal demonstration project could be under way in less than a year. ([Read "Is It Time to Kill Off the Flush Toilet?"](#))

MCPOOP was founded by a couple in their 50s. "We're on a mission to re-potty train America!" says John Wick, a rancher in the western part of the county. "We're going to start by replacing those nasty blue loos," says his wife Peggy Rathmann, referring to two chemical toilets on their town's main square. If that goes over well, they'll replace the chemical toilets around Tomales Bay that kayakers often use. And then, who knows? Wick and Rathmann don't see why every home in Marin County shouldn't be humanure equipped.

To Joe (Mr. Humanure) Jenkins, nothing could be better news. "On a small scale, my system works like a dream," he says. "But in order to do more research and development, I need to collect humanure on a larger scale."

MCPOOP and other projects are eager to help on the supply side. "We're going to have plenty," predicts Rathmann. "Tons of tourists come to West Marin, and they all leave us their poop!"

This is an expanded version of an article that originally appeared in the Dec. 14, 2009, issue of TIME

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