

# Humanure

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**Date :** July 31, 2016



**Image:** *Loveable Loo.*

When you live in the city, getting rid of human waste is as simple as a flush. When you are living off-grid, things get just a wee bit more complicated.

One of the first things you need to deal with when you start living on the land is how to dispose of the inevitable human waste. Even with 50 acres, if we just wandered off into the bush every time we felt the urge, things would start to get pretty messy pretty quickly around the cabin site.

There are a number of options, each with their various pros and cons. Possibly the simplest is to dig a “cat hole”, add waste until nearly full, cover, and repeat as necessary. Initially, before we had anything set up in the cabin, this is pretty much what we did. We used a couple of buckets in the cabin, and separated urine from feces from toilet paper. Toilet paper was burned in the stove, urine could be easily used in the garden or simply dumped a decent distance from the cabin, and feces went in the cat hole. However, this was, at best, a short term option.

We contemplated other possible solutions. Many people just use an outhouse – kind of works like a cat hole, only bigger. However, being one of those people afflicted with midnight peregrinations, I really wasn't interested in fighting off the bears and cougars on my way to the outhouse at night. I also hate trying to take a pee at -10°C. So the outhouse concept was out. Another possibility is a septic field. The downsides of septic fields is that you need to have a dedicated space, usually disguised as a lawn, for the field, and you need to pump out the solids tank regularly, something which would be hard to do way out here. So we contemplated composting toilets.

There are a lot of very fancy, and expensive, composting toilets on the market. Most claim to be odour free, relatively low maintenance, and generate a nice, ready-to-go compost that you can remove from the toilet and use in non-vegetable gardens. This all sounds really great, until you read some of the reviews and comments. Many composting toilets do produce some odour. Many require electricity to run a fan that operates constantly in order to reduce the excess moisture from urine. And the final product is generally not suitable for garden compost, as it has not reached a high enough temperature for a long enough time to kill off any potential pathogens. We were particularly worried about the constant electrical drain to operate such a unit, as this would mean having to invest in a larger electrical system for the cabin.

Sometimes the simplest solution is the best one. Ultimately we decided to go with the humanure system. Basically, you build a wooden box sized to hold a 5 gallon pail, with a toilet seat on top. Affectionately called a “Loveable Loo” by Joe Jenkins, the author of the [“Humanure Handbook”](#), this device makes up half the system. The other component is a compost bin (which is why we

needed to build one with such great urgency). Now, while the system itself is very simple, easy to make, and incredibly affordable, there are some tricks to making it work right. If anyone is interested in using this system, I highly recommend that you get a copy of the *Humanure Handbook*, and read it thoroughly. For example, we were quite concerned about possible odours in the cabin. When we were separating our waste streams, the separate urine and feces pails tended to develop quite an aura, and needed to be emptied frequently. However, following the humanure instructions, in which feces, urine, and toilet paper are deposited in the same pail, then covered with an organic cover material (we are using sawdust), there really is no more smell than one would expect from a flush toilet. The compost bin is also odour free. And one of the best parts about this system is that the composted humanure, along with food wastes, garden wastes, and weeds, can be applied to a vegetable garden in one year, provided it has reached a temperature of 50°C, or two years if it does not reach a high enough temperature. Not only does this conveniently solve the human waste problem, it also provides necessary nutrients and carbon to the garden, essential components for growing productive, healthy plants.