

19. ECO-INFO – YOUR WATERLESS COMPOSTING TOILET

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In unsewered areas, the proper on-site treatment and reuse of human wastes and household wastewater is critical in preserving the health of the public and the environment. Waterless composting toilets have been developed as a way of achieving this.

WHAT IS A WATERLESS COMPOSTING TOILET?

Waterless composting toilets (also known as humus closets or biological toilets) are waterless systems which rely on the principles of composting by microorganisms to decompose human waste, paper and other materials into humus.

Systems are either continuous or batch. Continuous systems contain one chamber, whilst the batch systems contain several bins, with rotation occurring after each bin is filled. In both systems, chambers or bins are installed below floor level.

Waterless composting toilets do not treat wastewater from other sources such as showers, sinks and washing machines (also known as greywater), so an alternative system is required for this.

HOW DOES A WATERLESS COMPOSTING TOILET WORK?

There are several types of water less composting toilets available, but the principles they use are basically the same. The description and diagram given here are for a single chamber continuous toilet.

Excreta (both urine and faeces) is collected in a sealed chamber beneath the toilet pedestal. Extra organic matter such as woodshavings, paper, or lawn clippings are added to create an ideal composting environment. Microorganisms decompose the material, with around three quarters of it being converted to carbon dioxide and water vapour. Air drawn through the pile removes these gases and assists the microorganisms.

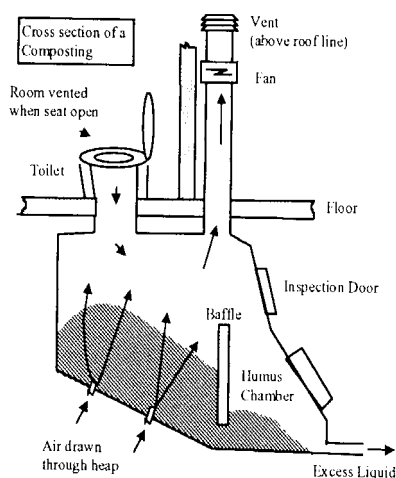


figure 1: cross section of a waterless composting toilet

The remaining material slowly moves down a sloping floor by gravity as more material is added to the pile. It then moves under a dividing baffle into the humus chamber as friable compost after about a year.

Any excess liquids are drained and treated with the greywater. The compost produced is buried on-site.

The advantage of composting toilets is that they can be used on difficult sites as they do not require water. National Parks and low usage camping areas with limited water supplies are common sites. They can also be used in single domestic premises and may be installed externally or within the dwelling.

REGULATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Before a composting toilet is installed at any unsewered domestic premises or unsewered site the owner/occupier should assess the site. Once satisfied that the site conditions will allow for a composting toilet, an approval can be sought from Wyong Shire Council. Houses may need to be specially designed to accommodate the units.

At present the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and the NSW Department of Health recommend that the greywater from premises with composting toilets be managed as for the total waste stream. This means treatment and reuse facilities for greywater are required such as a greywater treatment system, septic tank, or aerated wastewater treatment system, and land application area.

Maintenance is the responsibility of the owner/occupier and is not normally subject to a maintenance contract. **The owner/occupier needs to be committed to the principles of composting.** Maintenance varies among composting toilets, and the needs of particular units should be specified clearly in a manual. If maintenance is not undertaken properly there is an increased risk of disease and odour generation.

It is recommended that units be serviced annually by an approved service provider. Annual servicing should include a check of the operation of the fan and the amount and spread of the compost within the composting chambers.

The minimum composting period should not be less than 12 months. Compost, including partially composted material must not be removed from the premises unless written consent from Wyong Shire Council is obtained. Removal and application requirements may be specified by Wyong Shire Council. Unless otherwise directed by Council or the NSW Department of Health, the composted humus material is to be buried within the confines of the premises. The cover of soil over the deposited humus must be at least 75mm.

Compost must not be buried in an area used for the cultivation of crops for human consumption, unless:

- ◇ compost is placed in a separate lidded composting bin providing aeration, for at least three months with no further addition; OR
- ◇ compost has seasoned underground for at least three months

LOCATION OF COMPOSTING TOILETS

Some of the toilet designs are suited to sites with a natural slope to allow access

to the chamber/s for the required maintenance.

A northern exposure is desirable for solar power generation. Free air movement above the roof is necessary for ventilation purposes.

MAINTAINING YOUR COMPOSTING TOILET

Householders should be aware of the stringent maintenance requirements of composting toilets.

The factors of water content, temperature, air flow patterns, pH, toilet usage rate, surface area of compost and oxygen penetration depth, all influence the rate and effectiveness of the biological breakdown of the waste materials.

Correct operation of composting toilets requires the addition of carbon rich materials to the compost heap. Sawdust is normally added however vegetable scraps and lawn clippings will assist the decomposition process through the addition of organic matter, and reduction in moisture content. Newspaper, and other absorbent materials provide bulk and spaces which allow increased aeration and ensure appropriate conditions are maintained.

Surface area in which the compost is spread should be large enough to allow composting to be completed before it is buried too deeply. Also when there are high moisture levels in the compost, a very unpleasant odour is released.

The toilet seat should be kept closed when not in use to stop fly and insects entering the composting chamber.

MAINTENANCE TIPS

The following is a guide on how to achieve the most from your system through good maintenance procedures:

- ✓ record the commissioning date of each chamber for multi chamber systems
- ✓ always close the toilet lid when the toilet is not in use to control fly breeding and ensure proper aeration of the pile
- ✓ ensure that the material is spread evenly over the compost heap

- ✓ always clean the pedestal by hand with minimal use of water and no use of disinfectants
- ✓ consult the service agent if odour or vermin become excessive
- ✓ check moisture and temperature conditions regularly, to maintain optimum conditions for the composting process
- ✓ add organic and bulking material when required

Poorly maintained composting toilets may present health risks, cause odours and attract vermin and insects.

By looking after your treatment system you can do your part in helping to protect the environment and the health of you and your family.

More information can be obtained from additional Eco-info sheets:

- SepticSafe Your Sewage Management - Approval
- Your Septic System
- Your Aerated Wastewater Treatment System
- Your Land Application Area
- Options for On-site Sewage Management Systems

The Department of Local Government has issued Guidelines to assist Councils, home owners, developers and others. These Guidelines are called "Environment and Health Protection Guidelines - On-site Sewage Management for Single Households". They are available from Accounts Branch, Department of Local Government Locked Bag 1500 Bankstown N.S.W. 2200 for \$30 or accessible on the Internet on:

<http://www.dlg.nsw.gov.au/on-site.htm>

For further information contact Council's Customer Services Officers on (02) 4350 5555.