The best book I’ve read on composting is ‘The Humanure Handbook - A Guide to Composting Human Manure’ by Joseph Jenkins. I thoroughly recommend it to anyone keen on gardening, composting, creating a food forest or just curious about low cost off grid alternatives. It lays out the case for composting our own ‘waste’, deals carefully with the ‘ick’ factor, the hygiene issues and the value of the whole enterprise. And it does it in a way that is both entertaining (you can’t write a book on composting your own poop unless you have a sense of humour) and authoritative, backing up the methods recommended with research and links to the original research papers. Not only does it make the case for composting human manure (humanure), but Mr Jenkins also goes on to look at many of the composting myths that seem to complicate a relatively simple matter.

I had a problem after I’d installed a new shower room. I later decided a toilet in there would be handy too. It was a small room, big enough for a walk-in shower, but not much else. A toilet with a cistern behind it would jut out too far into the room. And then there was the issue with plumbing. I’ve done all the plumbing in our house, from fitting the gas boiler, the water pipes, the heating and the drains. But fitting another pipe to take away sewage would have meant tearing up the floor and ripping up the footpath outside to join the main pipe that goes off to the municipal pipe. So I started looking into compost toilets. And eventually, I came across the Humanure book.

I’d never considered composting our own sewage. Why bother? It’s not something most people think about. We use the toilet, pull the handle or push the button, and it’s gone. Out of sight, out of mind. Only in our case, in South Devon, it goes to a badly maintained sewage works with broken filters (I know the man commissioned to replace them) and a system that allows sewage into the rivers when the sewage works can’t cope with it, like, when it rains. So out of sight, out of mind, till you go for a walk by the river.

Dealing with your own sewage seems an absurd proposition though when for most of us, the instant disposal solution is available. The first thing that struck me when I considered trying it was the strange irony of going to do all the work I’d need to do to have our poop taken away, when I was in the habit every year of collecting farm yard manure – taking a trailer to the farm, loading the trailer with a fork, driving home with my pile, unloading it into a wheelbarrow and taking it down the steep hill which is my garden. I was sending my own manure away, with the installation work involved and the ongoing costs for water to flush it and then doing all that work to get animal manure. We ARE animals!

So now I’ve been using a compost toilet for 15 years. The work I have to do at home is collect a large sack of coarse sawdust from a nearby joinery workshop. A sack will keep us going for 2-3 months. We do our business on a little commode covering a bucket. Business done, we put a little shovel of damp sawdust on it. There’s no more smell than with a flushing toilet, and that is soon dealt with by the automatic fan with a timer. When the bucket is full, I empty it onto the compost heap. In summer, I cover that with weeds. In winter I might add another thin layer of sawdust. If it’s really cold, it doesn’t matter. When the compost bin is full, I start filling a new one and leave the first to sit, the material decomposing. After a few months, I shovel the finished compost onto raised beds, amongst the fruit trees and bushes or into an enclosure in one of my greenhouses for use in potting plants. I have a sideline in selling fruit and nut trees that I propagate, and this is the only compost I use for the pots. The trees grow well, and people are pleased with their purchases. It amuses me that really, they’re buying my poop, sawdust and weeds with added tree seeds or cuttings. After a year or two, those ingredients turn into nice little trees!

Anyway, I won’t make the case for composting your toilet matter here. If you’re really interested, just buy the Humanure book (I’m not on commission). Mr Jenkins makes the case. I have a degree in microbiology. You’d think I’d know the ins and outs of it all, but Mr Jenkins had a lot to teach me.

But there are two issues I have with the guidance in the Humanure book. The first is the way that the compost heap just sits on the ground – all that precious nitrogen and other nutrients seeping away into the soil and eventually making it to the groundwater where it does no good at all.