

Homes & Real Estate

Originally published September 20, 2013 at 8:05 PM | Page modified October 3, 2013 at 11:20 AM

Today's homes are flush with options for efficient toilets

Water-saving toilets are a major 21st-century environmental success story. Finding a “green” toilet that meets your household’s needs is almost as easy as — well, using one.

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

One-third of a gallon of water doesn't seem like much. But when millions of Americans save that much water with every flush of their toilets, it becomes a water-conservation tsunami.

Water-saving toilets are a major 21st-century environmental success story. Finding a “green” toilet that meets your household’s needs is almost as easy as — well, using one.

Not long ago, most toilets used more than three gallons of water for every flush. A few of those old toilets still toil away. But since 1994, all U.S. toilets sold have been required to use no more than 1.6 gallons per flush (gpf).

At first many folks complained, since those original water-saving toilets often left something to be desired, and something in the bowl.

But the toilet industry soon figured out how to make water-efficient toilets that people liked. Toilet manufacturers learned those lessons so well that toilets with an additional .32 fewer gallons per flush are now becoming the norm.

You can easily find these high-efficiency 1.28-gpf toilets in stores or online because they carry the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's WaterSense label.

Many plumbers, homeowners and consumer-products reviewers seem to agree that most 1.28-gpf toilets work fine. Better yet, they typically don't cost more than 1.6-gpf toilets. You can even get a \$30 rebate for a WaterSense toilet from Seattle Public Utilities and more than 15 other cities and water districts in King and Snohomish counties.

A recent visit to a major home-improvement chain store in Seattle found that of its 16 display models of toilets, 13 were WaterSense 1.28-gpf models, ranging in price from about \$100 to \$250.

And why wouldn't they be taking over the store shelves? Since they use 20 percent less water than a 1.6-gpf toilet, and toilets account for nearly 30 percent of indoor residential water consumption, many households can save real money on their water bill.

When choosing your WaterSense 1.28-gpf toilet, look for a major-brand model with at least a five-year warranty. Consumer Reports points out that quality and performance vary significantly within the major toilet brands, so seek out online reviews or personal recommendations for a specific model you're interested in.

Comfort counts, but try to avoid extra features that consume energy. Kohler's \$6,700 Numi dual-flush toilet touts its extreme water efficiency, but also it includes a seat warmer, foot warmer, music system and multicolor lighting. It even has a remote.

Dual-flush toilets, all the rage a few years ago, have one flush button for solids (usually 1.6 gpf) and the other for liquids (typically 0.9 to 1.1 gpf). This gives it an average of under 1.28 gpf, qualifying it for a WaterSense label.

But Consumer Reports gave most dual-flush toilets it tested fairly weak marks for performance, and some plumbers have also expressed skepticism. Several dual-flush models are reasonably priced at less than \$120, but a regular 1.28-gpf toilet would likely be a better choice than dual-flush for most households.

Water efficiency isn't the only purchasing consideration, of course. Be wary of pressure-assisted toilets, as opposed to more standard gravity-feed models. Consider toilets with features that resist stains and make cleaning easier. Keep in mind that many toilets are 16.5 to 17 inches high, compared with the traditional height of 14 to 15 inches. The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) standard height is 17 to 19 inches.

For a cabin, cottage or workshop, consider a composting toilet. Many efficient types are now available that use little or no water. The innovative Envirolet FlushSmart toilets from Sancor Industries, which combine composting and minuscule 0.05-gpf flushing, run from \$4,200 to \$7,500.

And consider reducing the eco-impact of your toilet in other ways. Recycle your old toilet by consulting King County's "What Do I Do With...?" listings on its Solid Waste Division website (<http://your.kingcounty.gov/solidwaste>). Choose "Construction and Demolition Debris — Porcelain" from the drop-down menu.

Never flush anything down the toilet (even products labeled "flushable") except bodily wastes and toilet paper. Use recycled-content toilet paper. Don't flush every time for liquids.

The bottom line: Save water, or get off the pot.

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services, and EcoConsumer is his biweekly column. He can be reached at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or via KCecoconsumer.com.