

CASE STUDY

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When Conventional Plumbing is too Costly or Impossible, One Proven Alternative Pleases Contractors and End Users

How property owner Kathy O'Brien used Saniflo-brand above-floor macerating toilet systems in three residences in Hawaii, overcoming tough plumbing challenges and increasing her rental income.

BY JULIE REYNOLDS

MAUI, HAWAII (MARCH 28, 2013) — Living on a beautiful Hawaiian island has obvious benefits. But when it comes to home-improvement projects, even an island paradise can present major challenges.

Kathy O'Brien has discovered this first-hand. Over the past 11 years, the retired commercial airline pilot has renovated three homes on Maui, each time facing down one of the biggest and most common home-improvement obstacles: no simple or inexpensive way to install conventional plumbing.

O'Brien's renovations all included updated and added bathrooms, but excavation for below-grade drainage for the new facilities wasn't practical for any of the projects. "In Maui, many homes are built on a slant uphill," she says. "In the area where I live, it is solid volcanic rock beneath the yards. Most houses are up on piers."

Rock or Cement, it's Expensive to Dig

O'Brien's plumbing situation was much the same as mainland homeowners who want to add a bathroom in a basement or garage or on a slab. No matter where you live, digging through concrete (or rock) is costly, time-consuming and very messy.

O'Brien first encountered this challenge when she helped her father update a spare bedroom and bathroom in his two-story island house in 2001.

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The Saniflo logo features the word "SANIFLO" in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The letter "O" is stylized as a white circle with a blue outline. The logo is set against a blue background that has a wavy, topographical shape.

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There was a McPherson up-flush toilet on the lower level that had worked well for nearly two decades, but needed replacing. The toilet's manufacturer was out of business and local contractors kept steering O'Brien toward the installation of a sewage ejector and a holding tank.

That concept didn't appeal to O'Brien, especially the need to pump out the tank regularly. Plus, she couldn't dig through the volcanic rock to bury the tank in the yard.

"I liked the idea of going direct to the sewer," she says, "but I couldn't have a conventional toilet, because you can't hook into a sewer line below the house. The sewer lines are on the street above you, so you have to pump waste up."

Undaunted by the prevailing local advice, O'Brien was determined to avoid the sewage ejection system. When she read an ad in a magazine about macerating plumbing systems from SFA Saniflo in Edison, N.J., she thought she was on to the solution. She called the company herself and subsequently purchased a unit through a local dealer.

"I'm mechanically minded, so I could see the benefit of how the pump works," she explains. "Macerating technology is a very clean approach."

How it Works

The Saniflo up-flush toilet looks much like a conventional model, but discharges effluent out its back – rather than out the bottom to a below-floor drain. With an up-flush system, waste and water are routed to the macerating device, housed in a highly durable enclosure set behind the water closet, either in front of or behind the wall. The macerator uses a fast-rotating cutting blade to turn waste and toilet paper into fine slurry that is quickly discharged under pressure through small-diameter piping into a septic tank or sewer system.

Both the fixture and the enclosed macerator are installed directly on top of the floor, while the discharge piping – like the macerator – can be positioned in front of or concealed behind the wall. The system can also handle wastewater from a sink and a tub/shower.

Not having to install a below-floor drain line avoids the expensive, time-consuming chore of breaking through concrete or – in O'Brien's case – volcanic rock. With macerating systems, walls and floors remain intact, and installation is accomplished quickly and economically with minimal disturbance to room layout.

The system can be fully operational within a day, says Joe Sakofske, manager of Advance Plumbing and Heating Supply Company in Walled Lake, Mich., a member of Saniflo's nationwide network of wholesalers and distributors.

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Sakofske isn't just a wholesaler; he's also a customer. He installed a Saniflo system in his own house recently when he added a home suite, so his sister-in-law could move in. "We used a Sanigrind, which saved busting up the floor," he says. "What would have taken three days with conventional plumbing took us just eight hours."

Encore Performances

Four years later, in 2005, O'Brien turned to Saniflo after purchasing the house next door to her father's and renovating it as a rental. The house had a lower-level studio, but no private bathroom. "I knew I could charge a higher rent with a Saniflo installation," O'Brien says.

At the time, macerating plumbing was still an emerging technology on the island. Because her local dealers were more familiar with sewage ejection, she tapped into Saniflo's nationwide network of wholesalers and distributors.

Working through Sakofske's company, O'Brien this time bought a Sanibest model to handle the bathroom sink and tub-shower. The most powerful of Saniflo's products, the Sanibest is a high-performance, one-horsepower grinding system constructed from hardened steel that can easily handle larger sanitary articles, as well as waste and toilet tissue. That makes it ideal for rental properties.

By the time she bought the third house in Maui in 2010, O'Brien had the macerating plumbing process down to a science. She decided to add a bathroom to the home's lower level office and, once again, knew Saniflo was her best option. For this install, she purchased a Sanigrind. Like the Sanibest, this model can pump effluent vertically 18 ft. and horizontally 150 ft., easily reaching the sewer connection on O'Brien's street.

Island or Mainland, Maceration is the Solution

Sakofske says interest in Saniflo plumbing is growing across the United States, as contractors and dealers learn about macerating technology and like what they see. "It's been used in Europe for some 50 years," he says. "It has steadily grown in this country over the past decade, but it takes some education before contractors truly understand its value."

To that end, Sakofske holds two to three training opportunities for his customers each year. "We introduce contractors to Saniflo with smaller projects, such as installing a wet bar in the basement," he says, adding that time- and cost-savings are a big part of his presentation.

"The worst thing you can tell a homeowner is that you're going to dig a 20-foot trench in his or her basement floor," Sakofske says. "People don't like that. It's a lot of work, and it's dirty and expensive. Maceration is a much neater way to go."

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The training sessions are effective and help contractors see the benefits of macerating technology vs. effluent pumps and sewage ejectors, which “can’t handle female hygiene products,” Sakofske explains. “Hygiene products would cause the sewage ejector to get plugged up, and then a repair has to be done. A service tech would need to unbolt the ejector and pump out some of the waste before repairs can even start. It’s a very messy situation. Guys who go into pits to repair sewage ejectors readily see how much better this system is. And once the contractors try maceration, they just take off with it.”

O’Brien is thrilled with the macerating technology and how it has overcome her plumbing challenges and improved her properties. “I’d buy it again,” she says. “I may be the only one who has Saniflo products in Maui, and I don’t know why. It’s wonderful.”

While Sakofske focuses on the contractor market, he also reaches consumers through home shows, where he presents working demonstration units. “If the end-user sees it, they want it, and they ask their contractor for it,” he says. “After the show we always hear from a dozen or so contractors who call and say their customers saw Saniflo at the show.”

SFA SANIFLO U.S.A. — whose parent company originated macerating plumbing technology — offers a complete line of up flush toilets and gray water pumping systems for residential and commercial applications. Saniflo developed its innovative, “above-floor plumbing” technology more than a half-century ago and has led its commercialization worldwide. Today, the company markets macerating technology through 14 subsidiaries in 50 countries and has sold more than six million units worldwide since 1958. Saniflo markets through independent sales agents throughout North America, and the product line is currently available at distributor and dealer locations throughout the United States and Canada.

For more information, contact Saniflo at 1-800-571-8191. Or visit the Saniflo website at www.saniflo.com.

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