What is green burial?

Green (or natural) burial emphasizes simplicity and environmental sustainability. The body is neither cremated nor prepared with chemicals such as embalming fluids. It is simply placed in a biodegradable coffin or shroud and interred without a concrete burial vault. The grave site is allowed to return to nature. The goal is complete decomposition of the body and its natural return to the soil. Only then can a burial truly be "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," a phrase so often used when we bury our dead.

Why choose green burial?

Green burials are not new. Most burials before the mid-19th century were conducted this way, as are many Jewish and Muslim burials today. Green burials are enjoying a resurgence in popularity, for a number of reasons:

- **Simplicity.** The idea of wrapping the body in a shroud or placing it in a plain, unadorned coffin appeals to those who prefer their burial arrangement to be simple, natural and unpretentious.
- **Lower cost.** Because green burials do not involve embalming, fancy caskets, or concrete vaults, they can be a very cost-effective alternative to conventional burials, lowering the cost by thousands of dollars. If the family supplies their own shroud or coffin, the cost can be further reduced.
- **Conserving natural resources.** Each year US cemeteries bury over 30 million board feet of hardwood and 90,000 tons of steel in caskets, 17,000 tons of steel and copper in vaults, and 1.6 million tons of reinforced concrete in vaults. With green burial, fewer resources are used.
- **Eliminating hazardous chemicals.** For some, forgoing the embalming process is the main attraction, since embalming fluid contains formaldehyde, a respiratory irritant and known carcinogen. In the US about 5.3 million gallons of embalming fluid are used every year, and funeral home workers are exposed to it routinely.
- **Preserving natural areas.** Love of nature and a desire for "eternal rest" in a forever-wild meadow or forest are frequently-cited reasons for choosing green burial. The burial sites restore or preserve a natural landscape populated by native trees, shrubs and wildflowers; the sites offer food and refuge to birds and other wildlife. The most conservation-intensive green cemeteries do not use fertilizer, pesticides, or herbicides. A green cemetery can be an important component in the acquisition and conservation of native habitats.

How do I choose a cemetery?

The first green cemetery opened in the US in 1998; about sixty operate here today. Some green cemeteries comprise a specially-designated section within a conventional cemetery. Others are expansive tracts of land, often contiguous with an existing park, critical habitat area or forever-wild conservation area. Not every region has a green or natural cemetery; to find one near you, check the website of the nonprofit Green Burial Council, at greenburialcouncil.org.

Most green cemeteries exclude embalmed remains and burial vaults; some exclude cremated remains as well. Shrouds or caskets made of natural, biodegradable, non-toxic materials are often specified. Graves are typically marked only by a natural rock, native plant or plaque flush with the ground, with grave locations recorded by GPS. To preserve the pristine natural landscape and protect native plants and wildlife, most green cemeteries forbid or limit personal plantings and many memorial decorations like flowers, wreaths, flags, chimes, balloons, and toys. Be sure to inquire about the cemetery's special restrictions when buying a plot.

What if there's no green cemetery nearby?

You can make any burial greener by eliminating embalming, and using a shroud or a biodegradable casket. Omit the vault if the cemetery will allow it. Otherwise, ask to use a concrete grave box with an open bottom, have holes drilled in the bottom of the vault, or invert the vault without its cover, so the body can return to the earth.

If you or your family members own rural property, home burial may be an option. Most states allow burial on private property, but each municipality has its own zoning requirements, so be sure to check and get the required permits. Keep in mind that unless you have established a family cemetery on your property, the land may be sold for other purposes, and the remains disturbed or rendered inaccessible.

How do I choose a funeral director?

As green burial increases in popularity, more and more funeral directors are willing to offer it as an option. Some already include this choice on their General Price Lists. However, the Federal Trade Commission, which regulates many aspects of the funeral industry, has not yet developed guidelines or standards for funeral homes or cemeteries offering green burials.

The Green Burial Council lists certified providers who are expected to publish and define

their green burial offerings, such as washing, preserving and restoring the body with biodegradable and non-toxic chemicals. They are also rated on their compliance with other optional criteria, such as offering viewing without embalming. However, limited resources make it difficult, at present, for the GBC to monitor their approved providers for continued compliance.

The National Funeral Directors Association offers its members a Green Funeral Practices Certificate, which recognizes that the funeral home has adopted environmentally responsible practices and offers environmentally friendly products and services to consumers. These include offering sustainable, biodegradable caskets and temporary preservation, without toxic embalming, for open casket viewing. But be aware that the certified provider is a member of the organization awarding the certification and has not necessarily been evaluated or approved by any independent organization.

How much does green burial cost?

Prices vary widely by region and the type of green burial site. Burial plots in a green cemetery tend to be larger than those in a conventional cemetery, so may cost more. The cost for a grave site and interment will range from $1,000 to $4,000 for a body, or from $200 to $1,000 for cremated remains.

Considering the simplicity of a green burial, funeral home prices can be surprisingly high—higher than for direct (or immediate) burial, which is also burial without embalming or viewing. Some funeral homes charge $5,000 or more for a green burial using a simple pine casket. A price of about $2,000 is more typical, though still high. To determine a fair price, compare the funeral home's charges for green burial and direct burial—they should be commensurate. Shop around among several funeral homes to find the most affordable price.

You can save considerable money by providing your own casket, rather than purchasing highly-promoted "earth-friendly caskets" that may cost thousands of dollars. The funeral director is required by law to accept any appropriate container you provide, without charging additional fees. Homemade or store-bought caskets of plain wood, cardboard or wicker would be acceptable at most green cemeteries. Instead of using a casket, you could wrap your loved one in a favorite blanket or quilt, especially one made of natural materials like cotton or wool. If you have time, you could sew a shroud yourself, or find a seamstress to make one for you at a reasonable price.

In short, don't fall for marketing tactics that appeal to your conscience while making a simpler send-off more costly, so you spend more to get less. Choosing green burial gives you the freedom to decline unnecessary services and merchandise. And this type of burial will be environmentally friendly and easier on your budget, whether it's touted as "green" or not. Don't forget, our very recent ancestors called these practices simply "burial."

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For more information

Green Burial Council: www.greenburialcouncil.org

Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial, Mark Harris. NY: Scribner, 2008.

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