

FOREVER GREEN

Eco-Burial Options Grow

by Avery Mack



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Natural burials allow those that lived their principles of an environmentally sound life to complete their days in a planet-friendly, personalized way.

"The number of U.S. cemeteries allowing natural burials has increased by 30 in the last year," says Elizabeth Fournier, owner of Cornerstone Funeral Services, in Boring, Oregon. "More than 150 cemeteries allow them now. We encourage replacing cut flowers with plants. A multipurpose wooden casket can serve as a bookshelf until needed, or a casket can be made of natural wicker, paper or grass." Formaldehyde-free embalming fluids made of non-toxic and biodegradable essential oils allow for a synthetic chemical-free burial.

"Green burials tend to be unique and can last from one to four hours," says Brian Flowers, green burial

coordinator for Moles Farewell Tributes, in Bellingham, Washington. "One funeral had 50 Civil War re-enactors in blue and gray outfits, along with a 21-musket and two-cannon salute. Another was led by a shaman. Natural burial isn't just for the Birkenstock/patchouli crowd. Our area is farm-rich, so a green burial fits with the idea of living close to the land."

The Moles' four-and-one-half-acre meadow for natural burial will expand in the next two years to eight acres. Flowers explains, "It's an ecological restoration site. We manage invasive species and plant three native plants for each burial."

In Houston, Terry Ward, president and CEO of Country Communities, notes how fast-paced lifestyles can prevent intimate connections among siblings. "At Indigo Fields, we're able to implant an app-accessible microchip

into an urn or stone. The information can include photos, details of the person's life and stories that might otherwise become lost. It can be updated at any time and serves as a gift for anyone researching the family tree. It helps the living heal and talk about their fears, too."

Added Green Alternatives

Cremation has always been an alternative to burial, but is energy intensive; recycling medical parts helps green up this option. Many choices are available for the cremains, the ashes that remain after a cremation.

Many states outlaw burying pet remains in a human cemetery, so Lisa Brambilla, of Yorba Linda, California, invented 100 percent biodegradable Bio Urns. "Before, pet lovers had few choices when it came time to say goodbye. Laying a cremated pet to rest this way makes a loss easier because it's a physical manifestation of a pet in plant form. It hurts a little less," she says. Each urn comes with a seed for a tree or shrub and the proper soil to help it grow.

"Maka, a keeshond, was the dog my son's heart bonded with; he was 6 when she died," Brambilla relates. "After she grew into a tree, he could smile when he talked about her. It teaches kids to create a new life and to treat the planet well. Death is nothing but a word. The only thing real is life." Bio Urn expanded to include human clients after Brambilla's father-in-law requested to be remembered via a redwood tree and her mother, a Christmas tree.

Eternal reefs are made of ashes mixed with cement placed in the ocean in a military-style ceremony to help support marine life for at least 500 years. Family members retain the reef's GPS coordinates and can boat or dive to visit it.

Music lovers can choose to have their ashes compressed into a vinyl record. A live recording of goodbyes, a last will and testament or compilation of favorite songs can be prerecorded. Ashes can also be compressed into

colorful memorial gemstones ready to be set into jewelry to keep a loved one close.

Resomation, or bio-cremation, liquefies the body in a heated alkaline bath, using far less energy than traditional cremation and without environmentally harmful chemical emissions; afterward, the bones are ground, resembling cremains, and are returned to the family.

Promession is a way to freeze-dry the body by immersion in liquid nitrogen at -321° F. When it becomes brittle, vibrations shake the corpse into small pieces, water is evaporated and the dust that remains can be used as compost. Invented by Swedish biologist Susanne Wiigh-Mäsak, she feels it's the utmost Earth-friendly way to return a body to the soil.

As people opt to avoid the higher costs of a traditional funeral and elect practical, eco-friendly ways to exit the human scene, natural burials can become more accepted ways to achieve Biblical dust-to-dust while doing no harm.

Connect with the freelance writer via AveryMack@mindspring.com.

GONE GREEN

Each year, traditional funerals use and bury:

- Hardwoods for caskets (30 million board feet)
- Steel for caskets (90,272 tons, plus 14,000 tons for vaults)
- Copper and bronze for caskets (2,700 tons)
- Reinforced concrete for vaults (1.636 million tons)
- Embalming fluids (827,060 gallons)

Earth-friendly methods:

- Cost about half as much as a traditional funeral.
- Use non-toxic embalming fluids.
- Offer biodegradable caskets.
- Replace quarried headstones with natural stone or greenery.
- Restore native plant areas, reducing invasive species, mowing and herbicides.
- Contribute to peace of mind with a green legacy.

Source: Casket and Funeral Supply Association of America

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