



On the Way to the Green Burial Cemetery: A Guide for Families

For many of us, what to do when someone dies is new territory. When green burial is chosen, it may be particularly unfamiliar. Not all green burial cemeteries are alike, and no two funerals are the same. This article is designed to walk families through some common understandings and perceptions regardless of where the burial occurs, and to answer questions that will help make a first green burial experience meaningful for all.

Why would someone choose green burial over conventional burial, cremation or other method?

More and more, people are looking for more eco-friendly, affordable, and personally meaningful ways to do just about everything. Green burial, and the natural processes leading up to disposition, mirrors for many the way in which they strived to live their lives — environmentally responsible and in harmony with nature. For some, green burial represents the closing of the circle between birth and death by being buried without any encumbrances or impediments, signaling a return to the simpler burial practices that have been interrupted for less than a hundred years. One of the major reasons people are drawn to green burial is its roots in tradition: up until a hundred years ago, everyone was buried this way.

So What Exactly Are Green Funerals, Home Funerals, and Green Burials?

Green funeral is a misnomer often used when confusing green burial and home funerals or home burials, but often is meant to describe conducting post-death care to disposition through natural means from start to finish.

Home funerals, sometimes referred to as home vigils or DIY funerals, often precede the burial as a way to care for the body with natural, non-invasive procedures, such as dry ice, Techni-ice, cooling blankets, open windows or other methods. Families and friends or spiritual community care teams bathe and dress the body at home, sometimes

staying 1-3 days, depending on what the family wants and the burial schedule permits. Often home funeral guides educate families and support them during the funeral period.

Blended funerals happen when the family has a home vigil, hiring a funeral director for filing paperwork, transportation, or other facet that the family prefers to have done by a professional. Blended families may welcome funeral directors into the home-based body care process, but more likely will want to perform these rituals themselves in privacy with possible guidance by phone or pre-arranged instruction. It is not uncommon for families to hire a funeral director just to fill out the paperwork and/or transport the body to the cemetery.

Professional green burial body preparation may be requested by families who want services provided by a funeral director that will culminate in a green burial. Funeral directors may be asked to prepare and shelter the body for burial without embalming (which is never required by law), with public visitations of unembalmed bodies a viable option.

Green burial allows full body interment into the ground in a manner that does not inhibit decomposition. The three top defining characteristics of any green burial are absence of a vault, non-toxic preparation of the body, and use of containers made of organic materials. Green burial funerals provide families with a rich, meaningful,

and healing experience while furthering legitimate environmental and societal aims such as protecting worker health, reducing carbon emissions, conserving natural resources, and preserving habitat.

Are green burials safe?

One of the top concerns families have about green burial is health ramifications of burial without a vault, which has been proven to provide no containment properties whatsoever.

More importantly, here is what a leading authority, Dr. Michael Osterholm, from the Center for Infectious Disease Policy and Research says, *"...the mere presence of a dead body without regard to its embalmed status and one that is not leaking blood from an open wound or perforation, does not pose any increased risk of infectious disease transmission for the person who might handle that body or review it in a private setting. Once a human dies, infectious agents that would be of any concern, including those on the individual's skin or internal organs, is[sic] greatly diminished... there simply is no measurable risk of that body transmitting an infectious disease agent. The use of embalming is of no consequence in reducing this risk. . ."*¹

The World Health Organization and the Pan American Health Organization agree. In a highly cited article regarding the negative effect on survivors' mental health caused by unwarranted rapid disposition after natural disasters attributed to unfounded fear of dead bodies, Oliver Morgan writes: *"... although some...diseases are highly contagious, their causative agents are unable to survive long in the human body following death...Indeed, survivors present a much more important reservoir for disease."*²

More and more, families are saying no to embalming to avoid invasive, toxic procedures. In fact, depending on the circumstances of death, bodies may be kept in a 65° room, with air

conditioning, dry ice or Techni ice beneath and on top of major organ areas, or cooling blankets. A body that has been bathed and prepped will show well during visitation at zero risk to anyone involved in the preparation process and in attendance at services. Even autopsy and accident victims, some with major disfigurement, have been successfully prepared for unembalmed visitation without creating a health risk to either workers or visitors.

Concerns about water contamination are taken very seriously, and green burial cemeteries undergo rigorous multi-disciplinary scientific scrutiny and testing at both the local and state levels. Parameters are strictly enforced, including distance from known drinking water sources and other infrastructure. Nothing filters better than soil, a premise we rely on for our septic systems, which are buried at a similar depth. Cement is not impermeable, and cement vaults are not meant to contain germs or chemicals but to prevent grave collapse and keep the lawn level for mowing. Removing vaults and using biodegradable containers promotes unimpeded, natural, aerobic decomposition, and enrichment of the soil.

Another concern is the unlikelihood of an animal digging up the grave. In over 20 years in every area of the country, there has not been one sighting of an animal disturbing a natural grave. In fact, prior to the 1930's, all burials were natural burials, and animals were not a problem. The 18+ inch distance between the dead body and the surface — called the smell zone — is sufficient to keep animals from being interested, even very hungry ones who, in the unlikely event of not being able to find enough appropriate and desirable food to eat above ground, come prowling.

What Should I Expect at the Green Burial Cemetery?

While all green cemeteries do not operate the same, the following is a typical description of what happens there when someone is buried. One major

difference between green and conventional burial is that attendees are an integral part of the service, with various opportunities to participate available.

Arriving at the cemetery

You may be greeted at the cemetery by a funeral director if one was hired who will act as a guide to the family and participants by explaining the process and what is about to occur, unless the family chooses to do this themselves. Because the burial will be outdoors in a natural setting, it is prudent to wear sturdy outdoor footwear and dress for the weather.

What the body might look like

Green burials require biodegradable containers in lieu of steel, bronze, copper, or exotic hardwood caskets. These might include a pine coffin made by a family member or neighbor, or by a local craftsman, a wicker, sea grass or other woven basket, a papier maché eco-pod, or any other container designed to degrade quickly in the ground. Also recommended are shrouds, carried on shrouding boards or with a removable board in a shroud pocket. Shrouds are available in a wide variety of materials and styles at varying price points, or an old quilt, sheet, or blanket will do. In the case of shrouds, the body form will be visible, and attendees should know that some people choose to keep the head uncovered until the moment of lowering.

Processionals

Cemetery staff may also be waiting at the entrance with a burial cart or other mode of transporting the body to the gravesite. The family may choose to assist in placing the deceased on the cart and help guide it to a chapel or graveside for the service. Other attendees will be able to walk from the parking area to the graveside. Some cemeteries, especially hybrid cemeteries, may have the capacity to drive vehicles closer to the gravesite. If anyone needs a lift, be sure to contact the family, funeral

director, or cemetery ahead of time to arrange for appropriate assistance.

What the grave looks like

Green burial graves are dug about 3.5 feet deep, rather than 5-6 feet as is necessary to accommodate large caskets in cement vaults. Rather than indoor-outdoor carpeting, wide boards are placed around the grave edges to inhibit collapse, which are often covered in greens. The gravesite may be adorned with natural local greenery along the grave floor or covering the excavated dirt mound to soften the appearance. Although there may be a motorized lowering device used, it is as likely that there will be ropes and slats across the grave where the casket or shrouding board may rest for a ceremony before being lowered by hand.

The service

The return of ceremonies and rituals that have all but disappeared in the wake of direct cremation is one of the greatest benefits of green burial. Clergy services, military honors, music of all description — all may be part of honoring the life of the departed. You can expect to experience a family's traditions or something different they have chosen to commemorate their loved one.

Lowering the body

For carrying the weight of the casket or shrouding board during a service, rails or slats are placed across the grave. Ropes or straps are laid across in preparation for lowering. Once the weight is transferred from the rails to the ropes or straps, the rails are removed,



Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery, Gainesville FL

and the casket or shroud is lowered into the grave.

Shroud burial

If the body is tightly shrouded, it can be lowered by using additional ropes or straps. Some shrouds are designed to have a support board inserted or even sewn inside. A shrouding board is also helpful both during transport and while lowering, especially if the shroud is wrapped loosely, and the board can be buried with the body or not.

Filling in the grave

The family may choose to assist in placing the body on the boards over the gravesite. After the service, the family may assist in lowering their loved one into the grave with ropes placed at intervals under the casket or body. Flowers and other biodegradable items may accompany the body into the grave, or be thrown in after lowering; consult the cemetery operator. Many people choose to participate by shoveling the dirt back into the grave and decorating the mound. Once the site is backfilled, the family often places a marker, if there is one. There will be ample time for graveside reflection during the interment and after.

What Goes On at the Green Burial Cemetery When We Leave?

Cemetery staff is responsible for completing the mound and clearing the area once the family has left. It will take a few weeks for the grave to begin to settle, eventually resulting in a relatively flat surface. Some cemeteries will add soil to the surface once the grave has compacted; others will simply leave it for nature to reclaim. Over time, the disturbed area will blend into the surrounding forest or meadow floor.

In the meantime, if they are part of the cemetery's mission, activities will continue, such as recreational or educational programs, community events, bird watching, or walking. Docents and volunteers are encouraged to assist with programs. Green burial cemeteries are becoming social hubs, places where people can congregate and create community, where life goes on. Check with your cemetery to find out when open hours are and feel free to visit with family and friends.

Resources

Green Burial Council
National Home Funeral Alliance
Funeral Consumers Alliance
National Funeral Directors Association

www.greenburialcouncil.org
www.homefuneralalliance.org
www.funerals.org
www.nfda.org

Harris, Mark. *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*. Scribner: New York, NY. 2007.

Kelly, Suzanne. *Greening Death: Reclaiming Burial Practices and Restoring Our Tie to the Earth*. Roman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD. 2015.

Webster, Lee. *Essentials for Practicing Home Funeral Guides*. CreateSpace. 2015.

¹ For Dr. Osterholm's complete testimony and more information on funeral-related health risks, go to [//www.funerals.org/faq/pdf_pamphlets/doc_download/217-dr-osterholm-letter-on-embalming-and-public-health-2009](http://www.funerals.org/faq/pdf_pamphlets/doc_download/217-dr-osterholm-letter-on-embalming-and-public-health-2009) and "Dead Bodies and Disease: The Danger That Does Not Exist" at <http://www.funerals.org/faq/142-embalming-myths-facts>

² "Management of Dead Bodies in Disaster Situations", Pan American Health Organization, 2004. A publication of the Area on Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief, in collaboration with the World Health Organization. http://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/pht/DeadBodiesBook_intro.pdf

This pamphlet was prepared by Lee Webster for the GBC with assistance from licensed FD Lindsay Soyer and Steelmantown cemeterian Ed Bixby.