

What Is Green Burial?

Green burial is a way of disposing of bodies after death. Called “green” burial for its ecological soundness, it is also commonly known as natural burial.

A green or natural burial uses no embalming, no metal casket, and no burial liner or vault; the marker, if used, is typically flat. Proponents often refer to it as “traditional” burial because it reclaims the more natural way in which nearly all were buried prior to the Civil War—one that is still used by some 90% of people elsewhere in the world. By using only biodegradable materials, green burial returns a human body and its burial container to the earth.

How Is this Different from Conventional Burial?

Conventional burial, with embalming, metal or hardwood casket, and burial vault, is the most common means of body disposal in the U.S.; for many, it offers comfort and predictability.

But it can be very expensive, often at a time when families can least afford the expense.

It also inhibits decomposition of the body and creates “landfills” of non-biodegradable and sometimes hazardous materials. By one estimate, we bury each year approximately

- 4.3 million gallons of embalming fluid;
- 64,500 tons of steel, 2,700 tons of copper and bronze, and 20-plus million board feet of hardwoods, much of it tropical (for caskets); and
- 1.6-plus million tons of reinforced concrete and 14,000 tons of steel (for burial vaults and foundations) (source: Green Bur Coun 2014).

We need to consider the resource consumption (water, fossil fuels) and byproducts (carbon dioxide, heavy metals, heat) of the manufacture of these buried materials, too.

What About Cremation?

Cremation is generally much less expensive than a conventional burial. It permits greater flexibility, as cremated remains may be buried or scattered when and where the family desires. Alternatives to burial or scattering are numerous and creative—cremated remains may be incorporated into various art forms, placed in coral reef balls, even shot into space.

But cremation requires sufficient fossil fuel to sustain a temperature of 1400°-1600° F. for some 4 hours; the heat produced by this process could be captured and used productively, but it rarely is. Cremation also produces a variety of air pollutants—particulate matter, carbon monoxide, mercury and dioxin, among others—resulting partly from the substances burned and partly from the combustion process itself.

In the context of an individual’s lifetime use of fossil fuels, a single cremation has a relatively small carbon footprint. Nationwide, the energy consumed by cremations would drive a car to the moon over 2500 times (Green Bur Coun 2014).

How Does Green Burial Work?

With green burial, a body is not embalmed. (Refrigeration, dry ice or ice packs will cool the body if immediate burial is not possible or desired. See www.nhfa.org for more information on home wakes.) The body is enclosed in a biodegradable container, such as a pine box, a cardboard coffin or a natural-fiber shroud, and placed directly into the earth rather than into a concrete “outer burial container.” A flat memorial stone may be used, or a tree or other planting may serve as a grave marker (often in combination with some form of computer mapping such as GPS). Burial at a depth of 3½ to 4 feet will permit access by aerobic bacteria to enhance decomposition.

Why Might I Want a Green Burial?

Any burial that uses green techniques will help to conserve resources, protect groundwater, and return bodily nutrients to the soil. For many people, this is reason enough to want a more ecologically friendly exit.

For the pioneers of dedicated natural burial grounds in the U.S., though, green burial is much more than a benign form of body disposal. It is also a way of actively pursuing land preservation and restoration, in meadow or woodland settings where people can hike and picnic as well as bury loved ones. We at Green Burial Massachusetts are working to open one or more burial grounds that will conserve land as well as restore death to its rightful place in the cycle of life.

Is Green Burial an Option in Massachusetts?

If you have sufficient land, it may be possible to have a green burial on your own property. You’ll need to get approval ahead of time from your local board of health.

Towns and private cemeteries are increasingly permitting natural burial, essentially by not requiring use of a burial vault. If you live in one of the following towns, green burial is available to you: Amherst; Brewster; Cambridge; Chesterfield; Heath; South Wellfleet; Springfield; Warwick; Wendell; Westfield; Williamsburg. And this list continues to grow. As we learn of other towns and cities where natural burial is permitted, we’ll add them to our website (www.greenburialma.org).

We do not yet have a dedicated green cemetery in Massachusetts. New York has

one (Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve, near Ithaca; www.naturalburial.org; (607) 564-7577), and Maine has two (Cedar Brook Burial Ground, near Portland; www.mainegreencemetery.com; (207) 637-2085; and Rainbow's End Natural Cemetery, south of Bangor; contact JoanHoward@att.net).

What Can I Do to Further Green Burial in Massachusetts?

■ Opt for a “greener” burial, even if your cemetery requires a vault: skip the embalming; choose a coffin made of local softwood (pine is good) or another biodegradable container; ask to omit the lid and invert the vault, so the body and its container can rest directly on the earth.

■ If your chosen cemetery is privately owned, speak to someone on its board of directors about your preferences.

■ If it's a municipal cemetery, speak to your local Cemetery Commission about permitting green burial. Better still, volunteer to serve on it.

■ Host a talk by a Green Burial Massachusetts speaker to increase awareness of this ecologically friendly burial option and generate interest and support.

■ Join us! GBM is actively working with Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust to establish a conservation cemetery in Massachusetts. We welcome your energy, talents and skills.

■ If you have land that might be suitable for this purpose, consider donating it to GBM. We are now incorporated as a non-profit.

■ Join the FCA of Western Mass. or FCA of Eastern Mass., and help to strengthen these resources for funeral information and advocacy.

Resources:

Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death, by Joshua Slocum and Lisa Carlson. Hinesburg, Vt.: Upper Access Books (2011).

Going Out Green: One Man's Adventure Planning His Own Burial, by Bob Butz. Traverse City, Mich.: Spirituality & Health Books (2009).

Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial, by Mark Harris. New York: Scribner (2007).

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Funeral Consumers Alliance—a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting a consumer's right to choose a meaningful, dignified, affordable funeral. www.funerals.org; (802) 865-8300.

Funeral Consumers Alliance of Eastern Massachusetts—an affiliate of the national FCA, serving Greater Boston and eastern Massachusetts. www.fcaemass.org; (617) 859-7990.

Funeral Consumers Alliance of Western Massachusetts—an affiliate of the national FCA, serving Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden and Hampshire counties in western Massachusetts through information, education and advocacy. www.funeralconsumerswmass.org; (413) 376-4747.

Green Burial Council—established in 2005 to provide information, establish standards, and build networks for making burial sustainable, meaningful and economically viable. www.greenburialcouncil.org; (888) 966-3330.

Ramsey Creek Preserve—the first green cemetery in the United States, established in 1998 by Memorial Ecosystems Inc. www.ramseycreekpreserve.com; (864) 647-7798.

Green Burial in Massachusetts

Questions and Answers



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