



Thinking About A Green Burial

The cost of funerals and burials can be shockingly expensive. If you have ever had to go through the experience for the first time, it is not unusual to have sticker shock once the final bill is presented to you. Traditionally, funerals and burials involved a lot of costly trappings—expensive caskets, embalming, iron vaults, headstones, bouquets of flowers, etc. Yet, in many instances, these traditional ways to bury a loved one are not good for the environment. Enter the “green burial” – a cheaper and more environmentally friendly option for your end of life decisions.

The idea behind a “green burial” is using far fewer resources in the funeral and burial process than normal, either by skipping steps altogether or making those steps friendlier to the environment. And this trend is growing. A recent study by the National Funeral Directors Association indicated that nearly 54% of Americans are considering a “green funeral” and 72% of cemeteries have reported an increase in demand in some type of environmentally friendly burial.

The Green Burial Council (www.greenburialcouncil.org) is a non-profit organization that advocates for “environmentally sustainable, natural death care through education and certification.” The Council educates funeral homes and cemeteries, as well as individuals, on creating environmentally friendly burial options. The Council’s website is full of ideas to limit the impact of the death process on the environment. Per the Council, every year, Americans put in the ground millions of feet of wood through caskets, millions of gallons of embalming fluid, and millions of tons of concrete, steel, copper and bronze. When considering these numbers, it is not surprising that people are gravitating toward an Earth-friendly death process.

Most people think that cremation would be environmentally friendly, and it is compared to a traditional burial. However, some are concerned about the carbon footprint of the cremation process. It has been calculated that the energy used in the cremation process is equivalent to a 500-mile-long car ride and releases chemicals and pollutants into the air. But cremation can still be “green” given that the use of embalming chemicals is not necessary and once your ashes are in a container, your loved ones can spread them wherever you want. Also, there are companies and products, such as “Let Your Love Grow,” (www.letyourlovegrow.com) that will help turn your loved one’s ashes into plantable soil that can be used to plant a tree, flowers, or a garden.

Green cemeteries range in the types of Earth-friendly services that are offered, but many offer a simple burial where your loved one’s body is placed in a shroud of natural, decomposable fabric and placed in a hole in the ground—no embalming, no vault, no casket. It is meant for the body to decompose naturally and return to the Earth. If you wanted a casket though, there are many companies who make environmentally friendly caskets in that they are created with a low carbon footprint and will decompose quicker than a traditional casket because it is made out of wicker or cardboard. Another company called Roots Tree Urn (www.rootstreeurn.com) offers a biodegradable urn made of sphagnum peat moss pulp that holds ashes and promotes the growth of a tree at the top of the urn.

Other green options for human remains are alkaline hydrolysis and human composting. Alkaline hydrolysis is a process that uses water to cremate a body. Unlike traditional cremation, this process does not release chemicals and pollutants into the air and uses about 80% less energy than the traditional cremation method. However, it is not available in all states. The state of Washington has recently passed a law allowing for “human composting.” This process, called “natural organic reduction,” turns a body into compost within about 30 days using alfalfa, straw, and wood chips. Once complete, the compost can be used to plant a tree or garden.

Due to climate change and the increasing temperatures of the seas, coral reefs are being decimated. One green burial option to address this problem is to mix your loved one’s ashes into an environmentally friendly concrete ball which is then placed into areas of the ocean chosen by your loved one. Once in place, the structure will be used as a home by coral and other sea life. The process has been approved by the Environmental Protection Agency.

These green burial options are just a handful of new ways to be more environmentally conscious with your end of life choices. If you are concerned about the impact your death may have on the environment, make sure your family knows your wishes and make sure those wishes are memorialized in your Advance Directives.

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