Your guide to creating a more unique and meaningful farewell that is gentler on the planet

a Greener Funeral
agreenerfuneral.org
GREEN IS FOR FUNERALS, TOO

The environmentally-conscious “green” lifestyle may be one of the most beneficial movements in the world today, yet most people only associate green with living. For people who want to preserve the environment, the practice of green funerals and burials presents a way to make the end of life more meaningful too.

More than half of Americans now say that they are concerned about the environment. According to an AARP national research report, at least 21% of Americans over the age of 50 would prefer an eco-friendly end-of-life ritual. For these people, green represents an ethical and philosophical choice.
WHAT IS A GREEN FUNERAL?

Webster’s online dictionary defines the word “green” (as it pertains to products and services) as “not harmful to the environment.” A green funeral is generally any end-of-life ritual that is as harmless as possible for the environment.

At death—the final rite of passage—we use ritual to celebrate, honor and preserve the memory of a life. Many environmentally-conscious families today seek a mix of traditional and green funeral options. “A Greener Funeral” and its companion Web guide aGreenerFuneral.org have been created to help you learn more about what’s involved in planning a greener funeral for yourself or a loved one.

A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The modern green funeral, also known as a “natural funeral” or “eco-funeral,” is both old and new. End-of-life rituals, including funerals and memorial services, are among the most significant practices of every culture on earth. These rituals have evolved over thousands of years of human history and many of the practices associated with greener funerals, such as shrouds, have long been in use.

Greener funeral practices are often compatible with the traditions of the major religions. Judaism and Islam, for example, have traditionally called for shrouds or simple wooden caskets and no embalming. Hinduism and Buddhism allow cremation, while traditionally Catholicism, Judaism and Islam have not. Although cremation is now common among all religions, consult with your spiritual leader to see which greener funeral rituals honor your religious tradition.

The essence of a greener funeral is a reduction in environmental
Green and Greener

At aGreenerFuneral.org we believe that green is in the eye of the beholder. For some, green means riding a bicycle, eating locally-grown organic vegetables and living off the electrical grid. For others, green is driving less, using less electricity and taking cloth bags to the grocery store. That’s why we use the terms “green” and “greener” in this guide. We think that whatever you choose to do to preserve and protect our environment is a good thing in life, and in death.

impact. Many people find that a more natural funeral is also more meaningful for the mourners.

Among the options for a greener funeral is a quick or “direct” burial, sometimes without a viewing or visitation service. This eliminates the need for preserving the body, but the burial may still be accompanied by a funeral or memorial service. If you would like a viewing, the body can be refrigerated instead of embalmed with toxic chemicals. If refrigeration isn’t available, ice or dry ice can be used to preserve the body until burial.

Also, the use of biodegradable funeral products (caskets, shrouds and urns) made of sustainable, eco-friendly materials minimizes the impact on the planet.

TO EMBALM OR NOT

Embalmimg, a relatively new practice in America, became common during the Civil War when it was used to preserve the bodies of fallen soldiers so that they could be buried at homes far from the battlefield. The practice became well-known when President
Abraham Lincoln’s body was embalmed for its formal trip from Washington, D.C. to Springfield, Illinois for burial.

Embalming has become such a common part of American funerals that many people assume that it is required by law. However, no state or province in North America automatically demands the embalming of bodies. When preservation of the body is specified by state ordinance, refrigeration, chilling or dry ice can often be substituted for embalming. Special circumstances such as an extended time between death and burial, or transportation of remains on commercial airline flights, may necessitate embalming.

Choosing not to embalm is a significant way to have a greener funeral. Embalming fluid is usually comprised of the carcinogenic chemical formaldehyde, which poses health risks to those who work with it. While an embalmed body at a funeral does not present a serious risk to the mourners, opting not to embalm is another way to help eliminate the unnecessary use of harsh chemicals that are not eco-friendly. For those who choose embalming, there are now several formaldehyde-free embalming fluids that will adequately preserve the body for up to several weeks.

**CREMATION – USING FEWER RESOURCES**

For many years, cremation has been the most common alternative to the traditional funeral. In some regions of America, cremation is chosen for as many as 80% of funerals.

Cremation is the reduction of the body to bone fragments through the application of intense heat. The fragments are then finely
processed so that they can be placed in an urn for final disposition. It requires no harmful chemicals like those used in the embalming process, and if the remains are scattered, no space in the ground is required.

Cremation uses far fewer resources than conventional burial, but it does have an environmental impact. Cremation requires the burning of fossil fuels, and some older cremation facilities use significantly more energy compared to newer ones. Mercury is also emitted when a person with dental amalgam fillings is cremated, but the development of effective filtration devices and the decline in use of dental amalgam fillings will eventually mitigate this problem.

Flameless Cremation uses less energy and is therefore a gentler, more eco-friendly alternative to traditional flame-based cremation. The process, sometimes called Alkaline Hydrolysis, occurs in a pressurized, stainless-steel vessel filled with a heated, alkaline solution. The alkalis, found in common household products, act as the catalyst to accelerate the body’s natural decomposition.

Families opting for cremation can take additional steps to make the process more eco-friendly, beginning with the use of shrouds or eco-friendly caskets. Cremation also allows for the recycling of medical implants. Cremated remains may be placed in urns made from materials that break down naturally in the earth, such as bamboo, cornstarch or sustainably produced handmade paper.

For those selecting water burial there are salt, gelatin and other biodegradable urns designed to float briefly, and then dissolve within hours or days, reducing the impact on aquatic life. Families who prefer to disperse or scatter cremated remains can use specially-designed, recyclable scattering tubes that facilitate clean, easy scattering.
Most cemeteries provide a variety of options for cremated remains, including ground spaces, columbaria (above-ground niches) or special gardens for the scattering of the remains. These are also greener options, because they use up less space.

**A SMALLER FOOTPRINT**

Greener funerals have inspired a variety of new funeral products that are sustainable and eco-friendly. Whether you want to reduce your carbon footprint, or find a simpler, more natural way to go, there are more options now than ever before.

**GREENER CASKETS**

Because a casket holds the body of the deceased, it is perhaps the central element of the traditional funeral. Choosing a green casket is therefore a significant way to make a funeral more eco-friendly.

At one time caskets were simple wooden boxes. Today they have evolved into sophisticated and highly-finished, often expensive items that many find wasteful. They typically do not use sustainable materials and are not environmentally-friendly.

Today there are more options, including green caskets made from sustainable materials such as heavy cardboard, wicker (woven from sustainably-grown willow, seagrass or bamboo) and softwoods such as pine. A biodegradable casket is also a greener choice.

Eco-friendly wicker caskets are suitable for green burial and clean cremation.
because it will break down more readily in the soil and therefore meets the requirements for burial in a green cemetery.

**BURIAL SHROUDS**

Many cultures and religions use or have used shrouds as part of their burial rituals, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism. A shroud is a long piece of cloth, usually a natural material such as cotton or linen, which is wrapped around a body after it has been prepared for burial. The shrouded body can be placed directly into the grave without a casket. This simple method uses minimal materials while still honoring the dignity of the deceased during burial.

Funeral homes can supply traditional shrouds, such as the Jewish “tachrichim,” or they may be obtained through religious organizations. You can also find shrouds from artisans and small businesses in a variety of styles and designs.

**Raw Materials**

Every year more than 90,000 tons of steel are used to make caskets in America. Copper and other metal alloys are also used, but in much smaller amounts. All metals are mined from the earth and are non-renewable resources.

Hardwoods such as maple, cherry, black walnut and redwood are also used to make traditional caskets. More than 30 million board feet of hardwood lumber are used to build wooden caskets each year. High-end wood caskets are often made from mahogany, an endangered rain forest tree.¹

¹ Statistics from wikipedia.org, compiled from funeral industry sources
GREENER URNS

The size, shape and materials of these urns can vary depending on whether they will be used for burial, entombment or display. Traditional materials include ceramic, marble, glass, metal, wood, or bronze. Most of these materials degrade extremely slowly, making them unsuitable for a green burial.

A wide variety of biodegradable urns is now available for ground or water burial. They are made from sustainable, recyclable and eco-friendly materials, including rock salt, handmade paper and cornstarch. If desired, these urns may be used for display of the remains, as they will not degrade until buried in the earth or in a body of water. Biodegradable urns designed for water burial will degrade in a matter of hours or days, thereby minimizing the impact on the environment.

Those who wish to place cremated remains in a tomb, columbarium or at home can choose greener permanent urns, such as those made from bamboo.

NEW BURIAL OPTIONS

Green burial is a “new” practice that is really very old, because it is based on methods used by some cultures for thousands of years. Green burial means that the body, which is not embalmed, is buried in an eco-friendly casket or shroud in a manner that allows it to return to the earth as quickly as possible. For this reason, green burial is also called “natural burial” or “eco-burial.”

A green burial may take place in a conventional modern cemetery.
or in a green cemetery that uses eco-friendly methods. With green burial, graves are typically dug by hand, and concrete vaults or grave liners are not used. Landscaping consists of native plants and trees that help create or preserve habitat for animals. There are no manicured lawns, eliminating the need for chemicals, irrigation and gas-powered mowers. Trees, natural stones and other materials are used in place of elaborate headstones. Some green cemeteries even use GPS coordinates to “mark” graves.

The first modern green cemetery, also known as a “woodland burial ground” or “natural cemetery”, opened in the United Kingdom in the 1990’s. Today there are more than 250 dedicated natural burial grounds in the UK. In the United States, the number is growing as demand for greener funerals increases. Many conventional cemeteries and memorial parks have opened sections exclusively for green burial. Some even allow vaultless burial anywhere in the cemetery. Green cemeteries are also being used to help protect endangered ecosystems by limiting residential or commercial development.

Even in a conventional cemetery you can still choose a greener burial. Opt for a green casket or a shroud, or choose cremation as a greener option.

Traditional, but with Greener Choices

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decline the use of a concrete vault or liner. (Vaults and liners are designed to prevent the ground from subsiding when the casket and body decompose. This practice makes it easier to maintain the manicured, level lawns we associate with modern memorial parks, but wastes a lot of resources). Many conventional cemeteries require either a vault or grave liner, but this may change if more people reject it. A greener option is a liner with no bottom, allowing the body or casket to rest in the earth. Ask your funeral director what the local cemetery allows.

With cremation, there are additional greener burial options for cremated remains, such as:

**Water burial:** Cremated remains are placed in a biodegradable container designed to break down in water within hours or days.

**Scattering:** Cremated remains are dispersed on land or over a body of water. Many cemeteries have dedicated scattering grounds which provide a convenient place for families to return to when they want to remember their departed loved one.

Note: Water burial and scattering may be governed by federal and local laws. Please consult your funeral professional when choosing one of these options.
HEADSTONES, TABLETS AND MEMORIALS

The practice of marking graves is an important part of remembering the dead and dealing with loss. The way in which you mark a grave can be a greener choice, as well. Natural cemeteries often plant trees or shrubs in place of headstones, tablets and other common markers. Planting local flora on or near the grave creates a living memorial and enhances the habitat for wildlife.

In a conventional cemetery, choose the smallest headstone allowed. Try to find a local monument builder who uses indigenous, rather than imported stone, thereby reducing the carbon footprint of production and transportation.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Whether you are a committed environmentalist, a lover of the outdoors, or just want a simple and unique memorial, green funerals allow every family to celebrate a life in a way that is more meaningful to them and healthier for our planet.

Our companion Web site, aGreenerFuneral.org, offers a wealth of additional resources on greener funerals and burials, including:

• Organizations that promote greener funerals and burials
• Links to online videos about greener funerals and burials
• Database of greener funeral & burial providers

Additionally, speak to your funeral professional for more information on greener funeral options. If the product that you want is not on display at the funeral home, ask them to order it for you immediately.