

Green Burial: A Growing Option **By Gail Rubin**

A staggering amount of resources are spent annually on traditional funerals, with a huge environmental impact. Every year, conventional burials utilize more than 827,000 gallons of embalming fluid, putting toxins and carcinogens into the earth; over 1.6 million tons of reinforced concrete for vaults; more than 90,000 tons of steel and 2,700 tons of copper and bronze for caskets; and 14,000 tons of steel for underground vaults.

That's enough metal to build a Golden Gate Bridge *each year*, and enough concrete to build a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit, according to Joe Sehee, Executive Director of the nonprofit Green Burial Council.

The rising interest in green burial is in fact a return to the practices that our forebears used prior to the rise of the modern funeral industry. Green burial fosters returning to the earth as naturally as possible and eschews embalming, sealed caskets and vaults to shield the body from the earth, and cemeteries with high-maintenance, resource-intensive landscaping.

Funeral providers are emerging to address this interest, committed to reducing toxins, waste, and carbon emissions associated with conventional end-of-life rituals. Here are some tips for those interested in embracing green burial:

- The Green Burial Council has certified over two-dozen burial grounds around the country. As of 2010, you can find them in California, Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, North Carolina, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, and Washington.
- The Green Burial Council certifies four categories of cemeteries:
 - Hybrid burial grounds – conventional cemeteries offering the option for burial without a vault or liner, no requirement for embalming, and allowing eco-friendly burial containers;
 - Low impact burial grounds – cemeteries that have non-toxic and energy-conserving practices, including integrated pest management. They prohibit vaults, liners, bodies embalmed with toxic chemicals and burial containers not made from natural or plant derived materials;

- Natural burial grounds – this includes all the low-impact burial ground practices, and they are designed, operated and maintained to produce a naturalistic appearance native to the region’s ecosystem.
- Conservation burial grounds – these meet all the requirements for a natural burial ground, and in addition must preserve an area of land in perpetuity with an established conservation organization.
- Conservation burial grounds can also serve as wildlife sanctuaries and nature preserves that restore and protect ecosystems. When operated as a nature conservancy, purchasing a burial plot can be a tax-deductible contribution.
- As of 2009, the Green Burial Council had certified at least 65 eco-friendly funeral homes in 36 states. If you only have conventional funeral homes in your area, avoid embalming by having the body refrigerated, purchase a plain pine casket, and dress the deceased in cotton or linen clothing, as is done in Jewish and Muslim burial traditions.
- Reconsider cremation. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust – cremation does generate CO2 emissions, but ash scattering has a low environmental impact.
- Consider a home burial. Most counties allow home burials if the family owns a minimum number of acres and a plat map of the family plot is filed with the county planning department. Home death care is another rising trend.
- Select burial products made from materials that are nontoxic and biodegradable, such as caskets or urns of soft woods like pine or poplar, body baskets of wicker, and cotton or linen shrouds.

“Consumers should know they do have options, no matter what end-of-life ritual or disposition choice appeals to them,” said Sehee. “And they can find providers who will accommodate them – that’s going to be increasingly easier to do.”

For more information, visit www.GreenBurialCouncil.org.

Gail Rubin is the author of the forthcoming book, A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for Those Who Don’t Plan to Die. For more information, visit www.AGoodGoodbye.com.