

What Is Green Burial?

Green burial is a way of returning bodies to the earth 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. Because only biodegradable materials are used, in green burial a human body and its burial container enrich the soil.

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 disposition 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 another 14,000 tons of steel, for burial vaults and foundations (Green Burial Council 2014).

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

What About Cremation?

Cremation is generally much less expensive than conventional burial. It permits greater flexibility, as cremated remains may be buried or scattered at the family’s convenience. Alternatively, 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°-1700° F. for about 90 minutes to 4 hours depending upon the manufacturer and age of the cremation equipment. 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, however, the energy consumed by cremations in one year would drive a car to the moon over 2500 times (Green Burial Council 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.homefuneralalliance.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, protection of our resources is reason enough to want a more ecologically friendly exit.

For many proponents of dedicated natural burial grounds in the U.S., though, green burial is much more than a benign form of burial. 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 aim 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. Please visit our website (www.greenburialma.org) or give us a call (617 393-5011) for a listing of the towns we know of in which a green burial is possible. As we learn of other towns and cities where natural burial is available, we’ll add them to our website. And please tell us if you know of one we should add!

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.maine greencemetery.com, (207) 637-2085; and Rainbow's End Natural Cemetery, south of Bangor; contact JoanHoward@att.net, (207) 825-3843.

What Can I Do to Further Green Burial in Massachusetts?

- Call the cemetery you're thinking of using and ask whether green burial is permitted. If it's privately owned, speak to someone on its board of directors. If it's a municipal cemetery, speak to the local Cemetery Commission.
- Cemetery Commissions often lack members. Why not volunteer to serve on yours?
- Similarly, call any funeral home you're considering and ask whether they will assist with a green burial. Cemeteries and funeral directors need to hear that this is something people want.
- 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 invert the vault, omitting the lid, so the body and its container rest directly on the earth.
- Host a talk by a Green Burial Massachusetts speaker to increase awareness of and support for this ecologically friendly burial option.
- 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 us! GBM is actively working with land trusts to establish one or more conservation cemeteries in Massachusetts. We welcome your energy, talents and skills.

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 eastern Massachusetts as far west as Worcester. 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. www.funeralconsumersw.mass.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, in Westminster, SC—the first green cemetery in the United States, established in 1998 by Memorial Ecosystems Inc. www.ramseycreekpreserve.com; (864) 647-7798.

(For additional resources, check out our website! www.greenburialma.org)

Green Burial in Massachusetts

Questions and Answers



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