

# Green Burial in a Hybrid Cemetery: Information for Local Boards of Health

## What is green or natural burial?

- Green burial is interment without embalming and without vaults or grave liners.
- An unembalmed body may be wrapped in a shroud (a length of cloth or an enveloping garment) and placed right into the ground or laid into a soft wood, wicker, cardboard, or other biodegradable container.

## Role of Local Board of Health in Approving a Cemetery Location

It is the duty and responsibility of local boards of health in Massachusetts to approve “the use of any lands either for new cemeteries or for the extension of existing cemeteries.” ([M.G.L. c.114. s.34](#))

According to [M.G.L. c. 114. S.35.](#): “No land other than that so used and appropriated on April tenth, nineteen hundred and eight, shall be used for the purpose of burial if it be so situated that surface water or ground drainage therefrom may enter any stream, pond, reservoir, well, filter gallery or other water used as a source of public water supply, or any tributary of a source so used, or any aqueduct or other works used in connection therewith, until a plan and description of the lands proposed for such use have been submitted to, and approved in writing by the department of environmental protection.”

## Approval of Green Burial in an Existing Cemetery

Approving the green burial option in an already existing cemetery (if it has been disallowed by requiring a vault or grave liner) is more straightforward than approving land for a new cemetery or for the extension of an existing cemetery, because the site in question has already been approved as a cemetery. “Green burial sites offer a number of advantages over traditional burials involving embalming and non-biodegradable caskets and vaults. Decomposition occurs much more quickly and the toxic organics associated with traditional burial methods are not introduced into the environment. Burial density is much lower and less frequent within an area. Thus, once properly located and with the proper setback from potable water sources, a green burial site will offer an even lower potential, both temporarily and spatially, to contaminate groundwater than a conventional cemetery.”

(Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, Office of Research and Standards. 2015.

*Recommendations on Setback Distances for Placement of Green Burial Sites from Private Drinking Water Wells*, p. 12.)

It falls to a local cemetery board or other town officials to approve the practice of green burial within an existing cemetery, i.e. to allow burial without use of vaults or grave liners, without embalming, and using only biodegradable materials, and to lay out green burial guidelines for a particular cemetery. This is a policy decision.

In the process of considering allowing green burial, these officials may want to take the extra step of consulting their local Board of Health. For instance, if they are considering allowing green burial on property that was approved for burial prior to 1908, meaning it was exempt from [M.G.L. c. 114. S.35](#), it could be prudent to check that the site complies with current guidance on protecting the public water supply by having a Massachusetts DEP Certified Soil Evaluator:

- evaluate soil quality (soil profile description, soil variability, depth to shallow bedrock, ledge, or other site limitations) and
- establish hydrogeological slope and seasonal high groundwater elevations.

## Home Burial

For information on home burial, see [Information for Local Boards of Health on Home Burials and Green Burials](#) <[www.mass.gov/info-details/information-for-local-boards-of-health-on-home-burials-and-green-burials](http://www.mass.gov/info-details/information-for-local-boards-of-health-on-home-burials-and-green-burials)>.

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