A Green Burial

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Mention the words “green”, “environmental”, or “sustainable”, and most people know exactly what you’re talking about. They understand “organic” and have even heard of compost and rain barrels. A few people are even knowledgeable about Fair Trade and local, seasonal foods. But mention a green burial and you’re usually met with a blank stare or an outright, “Huh?”

A movement that is slowly gaining awareness, green burials are an alternative to the traditional funerals and cremations that most of us are familiar with. They are a return to the burials of the past, when bodies were neither embalmed nor made-up, when graves did not consist of metal caskets in concrete vaults, and when cemeteries were not manicured with pesticides, herbicides, and carbon-dioxide-spewing machines. Nor are hundreds of pounds of toxins released through cremation, which requires about 285 kilowatt hours of gas and 15 kWh of electricity per cremation. According to Mary Woodsen, a board member of New York’s Greensprings Natural Cemetery, “You could take 83 round-trips to the moon on the power used annually for U.S. cremations.”

The September/October 2010 edition of Audubon Magazine has an article by Susan J. Tweit detailing the costs, both environmental and financial, of traditional burials and cremations and the benefits of green burials. <http://audubonmagazine.org/web/greenburial/> The burials that we are familiar with came into practice during the Civil War, when shipping the massive amounts of dead soldiers home required a way to preserve the bodies during transport. Thence began the common use of embalming fluids, which are formaldehyde-based today (early embalmers used arsenic) and cause elevated levels of cancer in workers who handle them every day. In addition to not embalming the body, green burials use eco-friendly caskets and shrouds and often allow family members to participate in final preparations of their loved one, such as washing the body and even hand-digging the grave. Of course, those who are not comfortable with that degree of participation can have those preparations performed by professionals, but people who have taken part say that it helped give them a more serene sense of closure.

“For the rest of my life I will remember that experience, “said Phillip Sheridan, who buried his mother in a nature preserve in South Carolina. “I saw my mother looking beautiful and natural in death, and that allowed me to let her go. I know that the roots and the leaves and the bugs will totally decompose her, and that’s the way it should be.”

There is a company called EcoEternity ([www.ecoeternity.com](http://www.ecoeternity.com)) that has two green burial sites in Virginia. One in Northern Virginia and one near Williamsburg. The site in Williamsburg allows a person to choose their own tree under which to be buried. An additional ecological benefit to green burials is that a portion of the cost from the burial goes to preserving the land where the graves are, most of which are natural forestland. Another benefit is cost. According to the National Funeral Directors Association traditional funerals can run up to $7,300, with the price of the plot, opening and closing the grave, and other services *not* included. A green burial with the whole package, including green funeral home services, eco-coffin, burial, and plot, might be about $4000.

Another option to be considered is alkaline hydrolysis, which uses lye, 300-degree heat and 60 pounds of pressure per square inch from big stainless-steel cylinders similar to pressure cookers that reduces the remains to ash similar to cremation. It is not commonly used, but it supposedly uses only 10% of the energy that cremation does, without releasing toxins. The ashes can then be returned to the family in an urn, or some people choose to submerge the ashes in a concrete reef ball, structures that are being used to help rebuild reef life. Thanks to green burials, a person’s commitment to the environment can be continued in death, as it was in life. The circle is complete.