

Back to nature

At Mountain View Cemetery, more people are choosing 'green' burials with biodegradable materials to assist decomposition and benefit the environment

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Victoria artist Paula Jardine pictures her burial taking place in a tiny cemetery on the same Gulf Island her mother lives on.

Instead of a casket, Jardine plans to be interred in a biodegradable box and buried no deeper than four feet, which she says will ensure the bugs that speed the decay of human flesh will be able to quickly devour her. Instead of a monument, Jardine wants her grave marked with a tiny garden gate that opens both ways, inscribed with the words, "Step through."

"My original plan was to have an apple tree planted over my grave so I can feed my great-grandchildren apples. Isn't it every mother's wish to keep feeding everybody?" laughs Jardine, the artist in residence at Mountain View Cemetery on Fraser Street. "But then I planted a gooseberry bush with my granddad's ashes but I can't bring myself to eat the berries. I've had to rethink the apple tree idea because it turns out to be kind of creepy."

Jardine encourages everyone to consider a "green" or "natural" burial as a way to reduce their environmental footprint. And she's working in the ideal location to spread the word.

In December, Mountain View became the first municipal-owned cemetery in North America to be given a "green hybrid" designation by the Santa Fe, New Mexico-based Green Burial Council. Formed in 2005, the council is a non-profit organization dedicated to encouraging environmentally sustainable death care.

To that end, the council created the first set of standards for ecologically sensitive funerals in the world.

While the natural burial movement in Canada has slowly been growing, there are already more than 200 locations offering similar services in the United Kingdom and the U.S.

Tatiana Chabeaux-Smith, manager of public relations for Consumer Protection B.C., says Royal Oak Burial Park in Saanich also offers green burials. Royal Oak is not a member of the Green Burial Council.

"And there could be other cemeteries in B.C. that are offering green burials, but they don't have to report to us so we don't know about them," she says.

Mountain View manager Glen Hodges says the 43-hectare cemetery has always offered green burials.



CREDIT: Photo by Dan Toulgoet

At Mountain View Cemetery, more people are choosing "green" burials with biodegradable materials to assist decomposition and benefit the environment.



CREDIT: Photo by Barbara Pedrick

Green burial advocate Paula Jardine wants to be interred in a biodegradable box to ensure a speedy decay.



CREDIT: Photo by Dan Toulgoet

Mountain View manager Glen Hodges says the cemetery has offered environmentally sustainable burials for many years.

"They just never had a name before," says Hodges. "We've always offered what they now call sustainable or green burials, but the difference is, now they have a name."

Bodies prepared for a green burial typically aren't embalmed. And if they are, only non-toxic fluids are used. Instead of a concrete vault, which typically includes 1.45 metric tons of reinforced concrete, bodies are placed in biodegradable coffins, often made of cardboard, or wrapped in a shroud and laid in the ground.

How long a corpse takes to decompose depends on many factors, including the geographic location of a body, the depth of burial, the time of year of burial and soil properties.

A human body will decay within 10 to 15 years and because it's mostly made up of water, protein, carbohydrates, mineral salts and fat, the body can eventually become one with the natural ecosystem.

Some green burial sites also prohibit permanent markers and instead use trees or shrubs planted at the grave site. Mountain View, which opened in 1887, also offers options for the green interment of cremated remains. Mountain View was certified a "green hybrid" cemetery by the Green Burial Council because it offers traditional and green burials.

Hodges says except for a brief period in the 1970s, Mountain View has never mandated the use of caskets or liners.

"But when a body is prepared for burial, most cemeteries do require some kind of rigid container and they're usually concrete," he says. "The reason for that is it reduces settling of the graves and leaves the ground nice and level."

Hodges notes perfectly even ground has never been a priority at Mountain View.

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He adds there's no law in B.C. requiring a casket liner or embalming, but there is a law requiring bodies to be transported in a closed container. Once at the cemetery, it's up to the family to decide what kind of container they want for the burial.

"So if someone shows up with a biodegradable casket, we have no concern burying that in the ground," he says.

Hodges says until recently most burials held at Mountain View without a liner or traditional casket were done because of religious beliefs. Now, he adds, there's an increase of requests from people concerned with decreasing their ecological footprint.

Not only are they better for the environment, but green burials are also less expensive than traditional ones using a casket and concrete liner. Traditional caskets can cost thousands of dollars, though last fall Walmart began selling several versions online starting with the Lady de Guadalupe steel casket for \$895 US.

Hodges says besides the cost of a casket, cemeteries charge an opening and closing handling fee for casket burials. "So because we don't make people purchase a casket, they also don't have to pay a handling fee," he says.

In December, Mountain View hosted a forum called Artists and the Green Funeral Movement, which included Hodges, Jardine and local artist Joseph Montague as speakers. Part of the discussion at the forum dealt with the fact Mountain View is one of very few cemeteries to offer families multi-generational use of

graves for casket burial.

Hodges says they make sense because all cemeteries have limited space--in fact Mountain View has no grave plots available for sale. Allowing families to bury several loved ones in a single grave is also considered environmentally friendly because it reduces the ecological footprint.

Hodges explains if a grave is 40 years old or older, the family can add to it. With permission from the family, what's left of the original remains is removed and the grave is made deeper. The original remains are then reburied, allowing for a second body to be placed on top. As well, the original headstone is shifted to a nearby location.

"In some graves we've done four or five casket burials," says Hodges. "They become true family burial sites."

Recent renovations at Mountain View resulted in more than 2,000 new spaces for cremated remains. Hodges says even some people being cremated are concerned about the environmental impact and request urns made from biodegradable materials, rather than traditional metal or plastic.

"They're asking to be returned to the earth and we permit that," says Hodges.

Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council, told the Courier that while there are several private funeral homes in Canada offering green burials, there are few cemeteries.

Mountain View is unique because not only is it a municipal cemetery, it's one of very few in Canada offering green burials.

"It's significant that these guys have come on board," says Sehee, during a phone interview from Santa Fe. "They're part of a new ethic in death care that shows ecological responsibility and transparency."

Sehee notes Mountain View joined the council at the lowest level of "green," because offering natural burials at the cemetery is an option, not a mandate. The council certification allows consumers to distinguish between four levels of green burials and also to understand that each has a different set of standards.

"Traditional burials have tremendous carbon footprints associated with them," says Sehee. "Mountain View is among the minority of cemeteries offering alternatives."

When the Green Burial Council formed in 2005, it brought together an organizing board comprised of professionals from sustainable landscape design, restoration ecology, conservation management, consumer affairs and law. Sehee says based on that input, the council established the first set of standards for eco-friendly burial grounds in the world.

Soon after, the council consulted with the funeral service industry and established standards for funeral homes willing to offer eco-friendly death care, as well as for manufacturers of green burial products and supplies. Sehee notes while England has long championed the green burial movement, not much has been done in that country to establish a set of standards.

Green burials use less energy and create less waste than conventional ones. Sehee says a green burial is essentially the way most of humanity cared for its dead for thousands of years up until the late 19th century.

The council requires green cemetery operators to commit to a certain degree of transparency, accountability and third party oversight.

The council is also a proponent of "conservation burial," as a means of protecting natural areas. In the

U.S. and Canada, some property owners are converting their land into cemeteries as a way to save it from development.

Conservation burials never degrade an ecosystem and, where possible, facilitates ecological restoration. A conservation burial requires biological, geological and hydrological surveys be completed, which determine where burials should and should not take place on a piece of land, and to what density.

Most significantly, conservation burial requires an established, independent conservation organization, most often a land trust, to serve as steward of the property and uphold a conservation easement. This legally enforceable agreement guarantees that the standards for conservation burial, set forth by the council, will be upheld on the land in perpetuity. It also prevents future owners from going back on whatever ecological or aesthetic promises were made in the past, such as limitations on burial density, to prohibitions against the use of monuments that would negatively impact a view corridor.

In Canada, homeowners who want to protect their land from development in perpetuity can work with the Guelph, Ont.-based Natural Burial Co-operative, not to be confused with the Toronto-based Natural Burial Association. The co-operative was formed on Earth Day 2006, by a group of Canadians seeking a more meaningful "end of life transition."

According to the Natural Burial Co-operative, suitable properties in Canada must be located within a short drive from a populated area, be cleared or have an open field adjacent to an existing forest or savannah, and offer between 4 to 20 hectares for interment, set within a large tract of land to be conserved.

Jardine says when she started researching death and burial rituals from around the world as part of her work at Mountain View, she was inspired by Austrian painter and architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, who in the 1970s wrote, "A person should be buried only half a metre, or two feet, beneath the surface. Then a tree should be planted there. He should be buried in a coffin that decays so that when you plant a tree on top, the tree will take something out of his substance. When you visit the grave, you don't visit a dead man, you visit a living being who was transformed into a tree. You say, 'This is my grandfather, the tree is growing well, fantastic.' You can develop a beautiful forest because the trees have their roots in the graves. That forest can spread over the landscape and, as we don't have enough forest, the forest will be conserved at the same time. It will be a park, a place for pleasure, a place to live, even a place to hunt. A fantastic place where you can live in constant contact with life and death."

Jardine says Hundertwasser also inspired her in planning her own burial. "What he said makes so much sense," she says. "It completes your cycle on earth. Why go to such great lengths to preserve a body when the common metaphor for death is, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

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