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Royal Oak Burial Park

Dust to dust: the case for a green burial

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For those who decide to go green, the choice now extends to their final resting place.

Woodlands, Canada's first urban green burial site, looks more like a park than a cemetery. It opened in October, 2008 at Royal Oak Burial Park in Saanich, B.C., and those buried there are either wrapped in a shroud or placed in a biodegradable wicker, bamboo, cardboard or untreated wood casket.

Embalming chemicals and concrete vaults are forbidden. Bodies are buried at a shallow depth – 1.2 metres, compared with the traditional two – to hasten decomposition. Instead of grave markers, names are inscribed on large rocks scattered about.

Woodlands is one of two Canadian cemeteries certified by the Green Burial Council, a U.S.-based international organization that encourages environmentally sustainable burials. According to the organization's founder and executive director, Joe Sehee, the cemetery is a "wonderful prototype that will be emulated throughout North America."

Business is good, says Royal Oak Burial Park executive director Stephen Olson. “The traditional funeral business views this as a fad, not a trend. Experience shows this is far more than a fad,” he says.

Green burials appeal to a broad range of people, says architect Erik Lees, the cemetery’s designer. “One of the first customers was an elderly lady who had been an environmentalist all of her life,” he said.

People from many cultural backgrounds have expressed an interest in Woodlands, Mr. Olson says. Customers “wanted a simpler alternative, to do it in the most natural way.”

One revelation is that a large majority of the people who pick green burials would have been cremated, Mr. Olson said. It's worth noting that Victoria is also North America's cremation capital, with an estimated 90 per cent of the area's population selecting cremation, according to Mr. Olson.

Just as organic produce can cost more, many believe green burials will prove expensive, but in fact, they cost less than other options. A traditional burial can cost up to \$8,790 in total; a green burial comes to \$4,945 on average, Mr. Olson said.

That said, according to Mr. Olson, price is rarely a deciding factor. Families have told him they would have chosen green burials even if the price surpassed conventional interment.

Inquiries have come from as far away as Winnipeg and Portland, Ore. A Kelowna family and several from Vancouver have set up green burials, some of the almost 80 who have made arrangements at Woodlands.

The practice is spreading across Canada. Vancouver's Mountain View Cemetery offers greener options – vaults and embalming aren't necessary and they use eco-friendly burial containers, while in Ontario, Cobourg Union Cemetery has a green burial section and Kitchener's Williamsburg Cemetery has a natural burial grove. In Lower Sackville, N.S., the Pleasant Hill cemetery also offers eco-friendly burials.

Canada's Green Burial Council representative, Don Morris, is well-acquainted with traditional funeral practices that could be greener – the former embalmer says he has been left with asthma from inhaling formaldehyde.

Europe has banned the use of formaldehyde for embalming, he said, and instead, botanical-based products are used. While few cemetery bylaws require bodies to be embalmed, it's a common North American practice, and Mr. Morris says he is working on changing that.

Conventional cemeteries also use a great deal of water and pesticides, while green burial grounds are pesticide-free.

Another environmentally unfriendly product is the concrete or fibreglass vaults that house caskets so that the earth above doesn't sink. A two-lane highway spanning the U.S. could be built with America's cemetery vaults, Mr. Sehee said.

The council founder is himself planning on having a green burial.

“I would love to be buried in a shroud in the ground and return to the earth as naturally as possible. I'd like to know that in a small way, my death contributed to the betterment of the earth,” he said.