

Going Green

by Camie Leard

Imagine a funeral with no hearse, no flowers and no undertaker. The body hasn't been embalmed and it lays in a papier maché casket. It will be placed into a hand-dug grave in a forested area where there are no lawns, no flower beds, there aren't even grave markers. Only trees, indigenous vegetation, animals and the deceased occupy this place.

This isn't a burial from the 18th century. It is a green burial and it is happening today all over the United Kingdom and in the States. Soon it could be making its way to Canada. Every year in the United States, people bury up to seven million gallons of formaldehyde in embalming fluid; 1,636,000 tons of reinforced concrete and 14,000 tons of steel in vaults; and 90,272 tons of steel, 2,700 tons of copper and bronze and 30-plus million board feet of hardwoods (much tropical) in caskets.

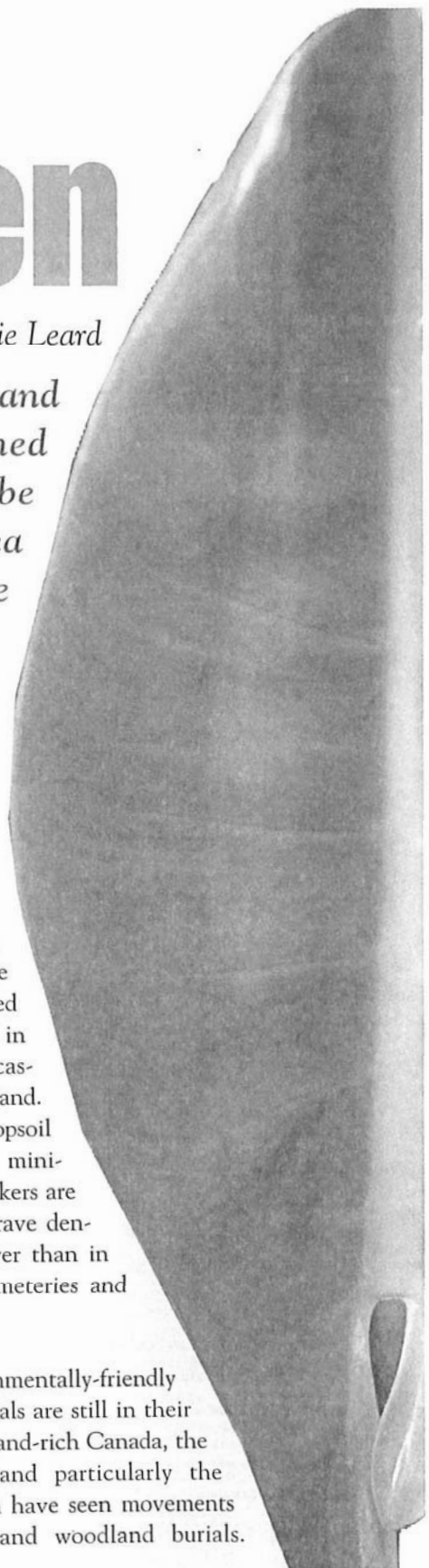
According to a 2000 study by Wirthlin Worldwide, 19 per cent of people choosing cremation do so in order to save land and 38 per cent of consumers indicated they would like a living memorial, such as planting a tree to commemorate a cremated loved one.

Green is fashionable. People are looking for ways to save money and reduce impact on the environment in business, in lifestyle and more and more so even in death.

Across North America, death care companies are pioneering new practises, and resurrecting old ones, to reduce the environmental impacts of burial and cremation. For instance, Memorial Ecosystems offers memorial natural

parks such as the Ramsey Creek Preserve in South Carolina. Here, the chemical-free remains of a loved one are interred in biodegradable caskets in a woodland. Disturbance to topsoil and root mats is minimized, grave markers are small and flat, grave density is much lower than in conventional cemeteries and grave sites

While environmentally-friendly funerals and burials are still in their infancy here in land-rich Canada, the United States and particularly the United Kingdom have seen movements towards green and woodland burials.



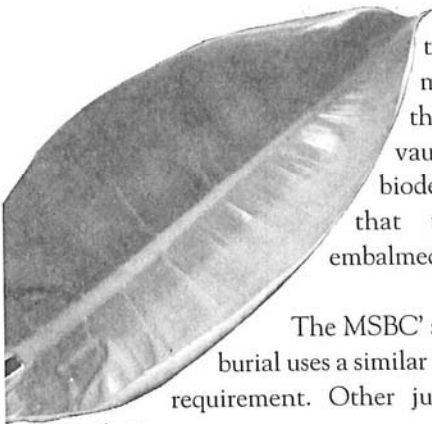
Stephen Olson, president of the CCABC, said while he's only received a few inquiries about environmentally friendly burials, he believes it is a trend that could potentially impact the cemetery business.

"I think there's an opportunity for cemeteries to work with people (wanting change) to come up with some solutions and new ideas," he said.

BC is currently the only province with an active lobby for green burials in the Memorial Society of BC (MSBC). With a membership of 207,000, it is the largest memorial society in North America and included in its mandate is "To promote environmentally sound arrangements for disposal of remains."

What Does Green Mean?

According to Olson, there are varying criteria that define a burial as "green".



"Basically we're talking about interment in a cemetery that uses no liner or vault, a 100 per cent biodegradable casket and that the body is not embalmed," he said.

The MSBC's committee for green burial uses a similar criteria as a minimum requirement. Other jurisdictions are more inclusive.

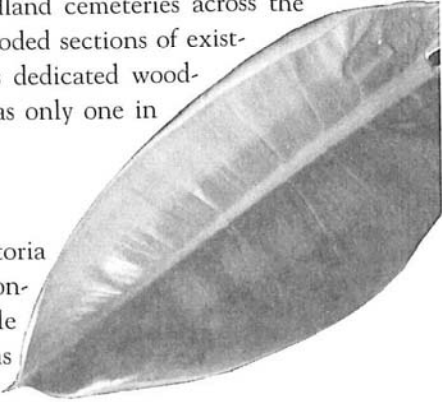
Olson continued. "The more purist people would want to be buried in a cemetery that requires very little if any maintenance in the way of landscaping, uses indigenous species and natural grasses and the graves would be unmarked."

The London Borough of Richmond-Upon-Thames' Environmental Planning and Review for Cemeteries notes the following additional criteria:

- The funeral is simple, meaning no flowers or large cars
- A memorial is not required
- The burial takes place in a natural surrounding, which has a conservation policy
- The funeral is carried out by the family and close friends without a funeral director
- The burial is in an unpurchased grave

Across England, there is a definite trend toward green burial with 95 woodland cemeteries across the country either as wooded sections of existing cemeteries or as dedicated woodland areas. There was only one in 1993.

An About Face

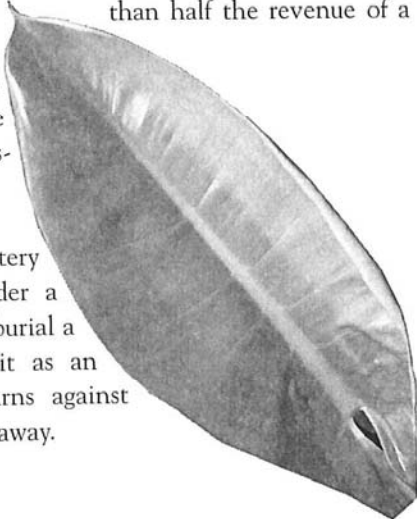


The first crematoria were touted as environmentally responsible and cremation was encouraged to "keep the land for the living." Most people still consider cremation to be the environmentally-friendly alternative. But according to studies in England, crematoria today account for 11 per cent of atmospheric dioxins and up to 15 per cent of mercury emissions (from tooth fillings). Suddenly, burial has come back into favour with environmentalists and those who want to go green are looking for ways to "give the body back to nature" without chemicals, concrete, steel and landscaping.

Olson said the challenge is to balance the desire for a completely eco-friendly burial with the need to protect cemeteries, ensuring areas are properly maintained, ensuring record keeping and that these areas are recognized under provincial legislation as human burial grounds. This might be part of the obstacle that has prevented woodland burial sites so far in Canada.

"As soon as you start to bury people somewhere, you have to register it as a cemetery, you have to have the land zoned properly, you have to have a certificate of operation and you have to ensure records are kept," he said. These requirements could make new sites financially unfeasible as internationally, woodland burials typically generate less than half the revenue of a

traditional burial. Which is also making them an attractive alternative for customers.



While some cemetery owners might consider a trend towards green burial a threat, Olson sees it as an opportunity and warns against pretending it will go away.



Photo courtesy of Stephen Olson

Memorial Woods & Columbarium Grove at Royal Oak Burial Park, Victoria

Opportunity Knocks

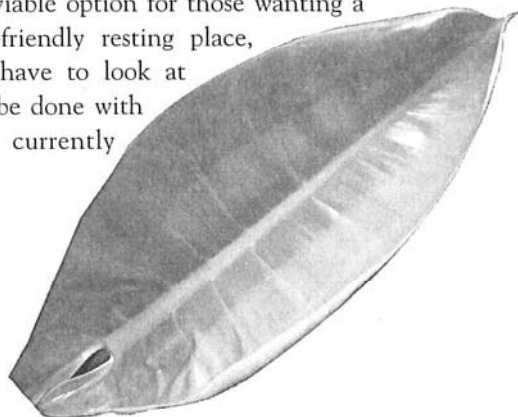
“If you’re proactive, then you can incorporate it,” he said. “If you choose to try and ignore it and not accommodate it, you might be looking at what happened to the funeral industry when it tried to ignore cremation in the 50s and 60s.”

Olson said looking for creative ways to work with the trends will be the key to a cemetery’s long-term success and that a number of options exist for all types of cemeteries.

“For cemeteries that have a land inventory available that could be adapted to use (as a green burial area) might want to rethink how they design their expansion,” he said. “It comes down to offering another option to people.”

Many cemeteries, though, are working with existing landscapes. How can they offer clients a more environmentally-friendly burial?

“Many years ago, especially here in BC, there was a tendency to clear cut an area and create vast stretches of green lands,” said Olson. “There was also the tendency to use exotic species of flowers and plants that require a lot of pesticide for maintenance.” Olson said if cemeteries want to remain a viable option for those wanting a more eco-friendly resting place, they will have to look at what can be done with what is currently available.



Options for existing cemeteries to become more “green” include:

- The use of environmentally friendly chemicals to clean memorial stones, as an alternative to caustic acids
- Composting a greater amount of mown grass, leaves, flowers and other plant material removed from the grounds
- A reduction in the use of herbicides/chemicals and peat used in ground maintenance
- Retaining cut timber in habitat piles rather than burning which releases carbon content
- Increasing tree planting in order to offset carbon dioxide emissions
- Reducing the use of moss and lichens in the construction of wreaths and other floral tributes
- Re-using wreath and associated fittings (generally plastic) as an alternative to their destruction
- Sourcing alternatives to teak, mahogany and other hardwoods used in the construction of garden seats, burial caskets, etc.
- Returning the metal content of hip and other bone repair implements for recycling following removal from cremated remains



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