

Green burial reflects nature

Green burial is a practice as old as humanity, but it's new again at the Royal Oak Burial Park in Saanich

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Green burial is a practice as old as humanity, but it's new again at the Royal Oak Burial Park in Saanich.

"As far as I know, we are the first in Canada in terms of being operational," said Stephen Olson, manager of the 55-hectare non-profit cemetery.

Royal Oak has set aside about one-eighth of a hectare on a pie-shaped site for green burial, a practice increasingly popular in Europe and offered at some U.S. cemeteries. Human remains are buried without embalming and decompose naturally. Biodegradable shrouds and caskets are used.

Spiritual beliefs, environmental concerns and lower costs all influence the choice for a green burial, Olson said yesterday.

Green burial is not only considered an alternative to traditional burials but to cremations, because of concerns about climate change.

The idea of adding a green burial service at Royal Oak was sparked by two Nanaimo women, who approached cemetery officials in 1999, Olson said. When a new master plan was later drawn up, it incorporated green burial plans and provincial approval was obtained.

Phones ring steadily from citizens asking about the service and the funeral industry is watching, Olson said. "We are fully prepared to share our expertise with other operators."



The first green burial at Royal Oak took place Nov. 6, for a woman who was a dedicated environmentalist and who chose the green option, he said. A second interment took place yesterday afternoon.

Several sales have taken place out of the 255 grave sites in the green burial area, known as Woodlands, Olson said. Four-foot by nine-foot grave sites are priced at \$2,600 or \$2,980 for a treed plot. Cremated remains are also welcome at the site.

By planting native trees, shrubs and wildflowers over the graves, the site will eventually return to its natural state. About 28 hectares remain to be developed at the burial park and more green burial sites are planned, Olson said.

No grave markers are allowed. Instead, space is allotted on several basalt boulders with flattened surfaces. "The memorials for people will be the tree or shrub that they plant on the grave, so the whole site will be a living memorial," Olson said.

Traditional burials may include embalming chemicals which help preserve bodies, metal-lined caskets with protective seals and heavy-duty grave liners, which also can be sealed. Remains "would mummify before they would decompose," Olson said. A green burial, which does not allow liners, would have a decomposition process of about two years, depending on such factors as temperature and soil condition.

Costs for environmentally-friendly caskets can run into several thousand dollars. At Sands Funeral Chapel, "green casket" choices include an unfinished pine box for \$1,895, a recycled fibre box at \$2,595, and a wicker model at \$2,695. Demand has been slow, but some people are asking for biodegradable urns, said manager Chris Benesch.

Green burial options reflect changing trends in society, Olson said. A century ago virtually everyone was buried, but cremation is now chosen for 92 per cent of the deaths in Greater Victoria, where 3,125 people died last year. Cremations typically cost about \$1,000, including funeral home fees, he said.

At Royal Oak, 160 to 200 burials are carried out annually and about 1,100 to 1,300 cremations take place in its natural-gas-fuelled crematorium.

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