



THE BIODEGRADABLE basket-weave casket, popular in the U.K., comes in many colours and may be adorned with wildflowers

## Going most gently into the night

### Caskets of wicker and recycled paper in fields of flowers: finally, eco-burial comes to Canada

**BY BARBARA RIGHTON** • It sits on a warehouse shelf in Burnaby, B.C., an anomaly among the burnished hardwoods. Six feet long and made of green wicker, it is Gordon Robchan's lone attempt to sell something other than the traditional caskets he makes at his Imperial Evergreen Casket Corp. The biodegradable basket weave is popular in the U.K., where so-called green, or natural, burials are thriving. It comes in many tones and colours and may be adorned with wildflowers. Still, it's pricey—\$900 wholesale, \$2,000 for customers, and that's not the only reason it hasn't sold. Says Ropchan, "It is difficult to get a new product into funeral homes."

In one corner of Canada, that's about to change. This fall, green burial is coming to the 134-acre Royal Oak Burial Park in Victoria. It will start small: the cemetery is offering half an acre to accommodate 284 eco-graves, all with biodegradable caskets. But the park may expand by another three-quarters of an acre. "There is tremendous interest," says executive director Stephen Olson. "Will that translate into actual use? I have no way of knowing."

There are some 10 natural burial grounds in the U.S., but the practice is really popular in England. Nick Brealey, sales director of Eco Coffins in Cambridge, points to nearly 300 sites where his recycled cardboard coffins—covered in ivy-printed paper or even custom designs, such as photos of the deceased—sell for as much as \$2,500. "There is a growing awareness that traditional coffins leak pollutants into the water table," Brealey says. Furthermore, when the body is cremated and the ashes are buried, he says, "the emissions from an Eco Coffin are up to 80 per cent less harmful." His company's offer to

ship to North America may interest natives of Victoria, where 92 per cent of the dead are cremated. Still, Olson admits that green burials of any type have components that even the broad-minded might not enjoy.

At Royal Oak, save for one large stone with names engraved on it, there will be no markers: people will have to find their loved ones with GPS—"OnStar for cemeteries," Olson jokes. Perhaps more upsetting, the spirit of green burials prohibits embalming. That means some loved ones may not arrive in time to say goodbye. "Most of us tend to deny our grief and sense of loss anyway," Rod Cameron, director of the Friscolanti Funeral Chapel in Hamilton, says. "Unless people are given the opportunity to view the body, there is no acceptance. If we don't see someone dead, we still expect to go to the grocery store and see them there."

But Bob MacRae, a retired rector and president of the Memorial Society of B.C., which advocates for reasonably priced funerals, is in favour. "It is environmentally more friendly," he says. "And it is a recognition that we are dust, and to dust we return." MacRae points out natural burials were the norm before embalming "became a profitable business." He buried his own mother-in-law in a natural way a few years ago: he bought a coffin, put her in it and took her to the church service

in a van. Then, grandkids in tow, he drove the casket to a cemetery and buried it. "My mother-in-law was a rural person," he explains. "Rural people understand life and death."

At Royal Oak, cemetery staff will dig the grave. "And a funeral home," Olson says. "will still do the pragmatic things: the transfer of the remains, the legal registration of the death, the burial permits and the care and shelter of the remains until the ceremony." Olson acknowledges those services won't come cheap. The grave won't either, at about \$2,000, plus the interment fee and maintenance, even in second-growth forest with a prescribed list of acceptable wildflowers.

In Ontario, Guelph city councillor and president of the Natural Burial Co-operative Mike Salisbury says money is not the issue. "Green burial doesn't necessarily mean people want to bury their loved ones more cheaply; they want meaningful memorials." Salisbury hopes to develop 25 acres near the town of Paisley for eco-burials. There, he says, he will emulate the American model: a burial ground and a conservation area, "something more significant to society at large." He says his co-op has more than 100 members "even though there are no products or services yet."

Royal Oak, too, has dozens of names on a waiting list, but it's not in the business of preaching. "We are not looking to change the way the world buries its dead," Olson says. "For the family who wants a mausoleum, we will accommodate that too." Amen. M



#### WHAT THEY GOT FOR IT... HOUSEHOLD TREASURES

A British estate is disposing of an art collection, which had been kicking around inside a late pensioner's house, that is estimated to be worth \$5.4 million. In addition to two Fra Angelicos found behind a door in the late Jean Preston's home in Oxford, there was a rare edition of Chaucer's works, worth nearly \$200,000, in a wardrobe, and a painting by Rossetti in the kitchen. Part of the collection is being donated to the public to settle a tax bill.