



Photography courtesy of Mark Hopper, Belleville Cemetery
December, 2014

Green Burial In Canada: Here To Stay and A Growing Trend

article provided by Heidi Redman, LEES + Associates

What is Green Burial – The Shades of Green

Known under many names, including “natural burial,” “eco-burial,” “woodland burial,” and “country burial,” green burial is rooted in minimizing the impact of human burial on the environment. While the level of “greenness” varies, in practice, a green burial is considered to have at least two of the following pillars:

- Does not include embalming;
- A simple casket or shroud;
- Does not include use of concrete grave liners;
- Simple memorialization, and
- Some aspect of habitat or ecosystems enhancement.

Who is Choosing Green Burial and Why?

Traditional burial practices can have an environmental impact: consider that a typical 10 acre cemetery, fully occupied, includes about 85,000 litres of formaldehyde. The concrete used to construct burial vaults in North America in one year is enough to build an 850km highway from Toronto to Quebec City. While environmental considerations are an obvious driver behind green burial, the simpler, more natural option resonates with families on a fundamental level. Green burial responds to people looking for a meaningful send-off, that reflects their personal values of sustainable living. At Royal Oak Burial Park in Victoria, BC, about 90 percent of people choosing green burial had previously planned for a cremation—which suggests that green burial is attracting families from the country's rising cremation market, rather than the traditional casket market.

How does Cremation Square with “Green?”

Based on multiple phone surveys our firm has undertaken over the years, many people choose cremation over traditional burial because it is perceived to be simpler and less expensive, and less of an impact on the environment. While cremation uses less resources than most other disposition options it still has an impact on the environment—a typical cremation uses the equivalent of 27 litres of gasoline. However, cremation is becoming “green-er” through more modern cremation facilities which have more effective filtration and much increased energy efficiency. While no standards or certifications exist for “green” cremation there is an increasing variety of environmentally friendly, and biodegradable funeral products available. Some cemeteries choose to incorporate cremated remains interment options such as scattering, or biodegradable in-ground remains interments into a natural burial area, a choice dependent on the shade of green the cemetery has adopted.

Green Burial in the UK, US and Canada

The first modern green cemetery was established in 1993 at Carlisle Cemetery in Bristol, United Kingdom. Today, there are over 270 natural burial sites across the UK, with green burials representing about 12% of in-ground burials. The first green cemetery in the US was established in 1998 at Ramsey Creek Preserve in South Carolina. In 2005, the US based Green Burial Council (GBC) was formed, establishing the first standards and eco-certification process for cemeteries, funeral providers and burial products. Today, nearly 400 approved cemeteries, funeral providers and burial products are certified by the GBC including approved funeral providers in Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Quebec and Saskatchewan.

The Canadian Context

There are two cemeteries in Canada currently certified by the Green Burial Council: Royal Oak Burial Park in Victoria, BC and Mountain View Cemetery in Vancouver, BC. There is also a green burial section at Union Cemetery in Cobourg, ON, and Kitchener's Williamsburg Cemetery, among others. While green burial still represents a small portion of the overall market, trends indicate demand is increasing. Over the past three years, Royal Oak Burial Park has sold an average of 50 green burial plots per year, with a ratio of at-need to pre-need sales of almost 1:1. Plans are underway to expand the site to two-thirds of an acre, effectively doubling the amount of lots available.

The Green Burial Society of Canada

The Green Burial Society of Canada (GBSC) was founded in April, 2014 with 20 charter members and election of an interim board. The purpose of the Society is to advocate, assist and educate as a steward of the growing green burial movement in Canada. The GBSC will work with the Green Burial Council of the US for issuance of designations while a “made in Canada” version of the certification process is developed over the coming years.

Trends in Green Burial Design

Site specific design is imperative—green burials are not “cookie-cutter,” and this means understanding critical site layout and design decisions unique to green burial. Green burial design should achieve reasonable capacity along with a sensitive touch on the land, synchronizing with the natural environment. Buffer zones, edge locations, or undeveloped areas with existing native vegetation are often the most appropriate landscape types for a green burial site, although areas previously disturbed or over run with invasive species are also suitable.

While green burial typically involves communal rather than individual markers, memorialization strategies need to be flexible, recognizing our primal need to mark the place of our loved ones. Communal markers, made of stone or natural materials may be placed to serve sections or “pods” of graves, and can incorporate digital commemoration strategies using GIS and GPS technologies.

Planting schemes make use of native plants, blending biodiversity with aesthetic interest – without using invasive, exotic plants. Green burial can help re-establish a disturbed site with desirable native vegetation. Families are encouraged to assist with the planting, offering an alternative to traditional flower tributes. A planting palette pre-selected by the cemetery helps communicate the vision and ultimate intent of the landscape.

I design green cemeteries as, for me, they are spaces at the confluence of meaning, memory, ecological healing and community narrative.
- Erik Lees

What Does Green Burial Mean for the Cemetery?

The first Canadian cemeteries offering green burial options bring our profession valuable insight into the financial ramifications and benefits of green burial. Some of the benefits for a cemetery include:

- Pricing comparable to a standard casket lot;
- Reduced maintenance costs, which will diminish over time (Royal Oak’s green burial area is maintained at 60% percent of typical maintenance costs);
- Lot layout that is equally efficient to conventional burial;
- The creation of a naturalized green space in the long term;
- With double depth and cremation interments, additional revenue can be generated over time, and

- Enhanced use of an edge location or buffer zone in the cemetery.

Green burial is unquestionably an emerging trend. It is here to stay, and well positioned to respond to an increasing demand for innovation, greater flexibility, and increased options in how after-death care is provided.

Heidi Redman is a Senior Associate at LEES+Associates a cemetery planning and design firm with offices in Toronto and Vancouver. The Green Burial Society of Canada can be contacted at greenburialcanada@gmail.com



Union Cemetery, Cobourg ON



Mountain View Cemetery,
Vancouver BC



Royal Oak Burial Park,
Victoria BC