

The last step in going green: British Columbians opt for eco-friendly burials

BY CHERYL CHAN, THE PROVINCE MAY 20, 2014

Rogers Chocolates



Demand for the more eco-friendly green burials (no formaldehyde, shallower graves, no markers, biodegradable casket or shroud) is growing in B.C., says Stephen Olsen, executive director of Royal Oak Cemetery in Victoria.

Photograph by: BRUCE STOTESBURY, PROVINCE

Leanne Rooney is trying to decide what to plant above her husband's grave. Will it be a Douglas fir or a red alder? A big leaf maple, perhaps, or a native shrub?

Three weeks ago, John Rooney was laid to rest at Woodlands, B.C.'s only green burial site at Victoria's Royal Oak cemetery. He was buried in a simple pine box, built with no nails, glue or varnish.

It was a hard decision for Rooney, who had to sacrifice proximity so that ethically and environmentally, her husband rested at a better place.

“We didn’t want to cause more pollution,” Leanne said from their Vancouver home. “We wanted to be a positive thing for the world, not a negative.”

Her husband was the 102nd person to be buried in the quiet forested grove. Without the boulder memorials, it is hard to tell Woodlands is the resting place of more than 100 souls, especially as recently-planted trees and bushes mature and meld into the natural landscape.

“I can just imagine how beautiful it will be,” Leanne said. “It’ll be a very small footprint. There are no markers. I’m OK with that. I took GPS co-ordinates so I can visit him when I can.”

The Rooneys represent a segment of the population — environmentally-conscious people who lived their lives green and are seeking greener alternatives in death — that’s fuelling the growing popularity of green burials, forcing cemeteries to consider new approaches.

Typically, green burials ban the use of embalming fluids and concrete vaults. Bodies are laid to rest in biodegradable shrouds or caskets and in shallower graves to aid natural decomposition. Instead of individual markers, names are often inscribed on a common marker, or in some cases, no markers are used.

There have been 103 green burials at Woodlands since it opened in the fall of 2008. Another 83 people have prearranged their burials at the site. Plans are underway to expand Woodlands to two-thirds of an acre, doubling the current 254 lots to about 500.

Executive director Stephen Olson is so certain demand for green burials will increase he has committed to dedicating half of Royal Oak’s yet-to-be-developed 74 acres to natural burial in the future.

“That’s how convinced we are that this is going to be so widely adopted,” he said.

So far, green burials have been slow to catch on in Canada. Aside from Woodlands, there are three other green cemeteries in Ontario. In comparison, there are more than 200 green cemeteries in the U.K.

Contrary to predictions that green burials are a fad that will die out, many believe the back-to-basics

practice is here to stay.

Michael de Pencier, director of the Natural Burial Association, is calling for a departure from modern burial practices, which with their granite or marble head stones and exotic-wood caskets, can be expensive and wasteful.

“All this opulence is fairly recent, driven by the industry and society,” he said. “We have to get people to picture, what would you like when you die? Would you rather be buried under an oak tree or under a big slab of marble?”

The Ontario-based association is working toward raising awareness of eco-friendly burial practices, but also wants to push the concept further. So far, all green burial sites in Canada are attached to traditional cemeteries, de Pencier said. He would like to see the creation of natural cemeteries that become unprotected parkland.

In Vancouver, Mountain View cemetery has been quietly offering greener options for years.

The cemetery, which is one of two listed as offering green burials by the U.S.-based Green Burial Council, allows graves with no concrete vaults. Only six per cent of casket burials at the Fraser Street cemetery use vaults. It also allows families to reuse and share burial space — arguably, a greener way to go.

Even though green burials are less costly than traditional burials — foregoing concrete vaults and head stones can cut about \$2,000 from the bill — for those who opt to go green, it is never about the money.

“It resonates with them on a very philosophical or spiritual level,” Olsen said.

About 90 per cent of people who choose green burials had previously expressed a preference for cremation, Olson noted. It suggests that even though green burials make up only a small fraction of interments in B.C., they could nibble away at the province’s cremation rate, which at 80 per cent is one of the highest in North America.

Most people choose cremation over traditional burials because it is simpler and less expensive, and is considered to be more environmentally friendly. But cremation releases carbon emissions and mercury toxins from dental fillings into the air.

Of course, green burials are not new. In the past, most burials were green by necessity.

Over the last century, the practice was eclipsed by modern funeral practices with shiny caskets, formaldehyde in embalming fluid and manicured green lawns held up by underground concrete lining the norm.

But the tide seems to be changing.

Green burials are becoming very “au courant,” said Catriona Hearn of landscape design firm Lees + Associates, which designed Woodlands and many other cemeteries in B.C.

“Every municipal cemetery is talking about this,” she said. “Virtually every community doing cemetery planning is having to consider green burials. They may choose not to offer it, but they are talking about it.”

In Salmon Arm, the city’s conceptual plan for its new cemetery site include green burial ‘pods’ in wooded areas rather than clear-cut zones. On Denman Island, a group of residents has been working since 2009 to establish a natural cemetery on land protected by a conservation covenant.

But so far, the interest doesn’t seem to be translating to actual green burial cemeteries — at least not yet. One obstacle is the uncertainty whether there is a sufficient market for it.

“No one really knows where it is going right now,” Hearn said. “It’s hard to offer it when they’re not sure about the uptake.”

Another obstacle, especially in urban areas, is the cost of land and geography.

Mountain View, for example, has no forested land it can use, manager Glen Hodges said. Surrey, too, which is in the early stages of planning a new cemetery, is limited to open lawn areas.

The biggest hurdle, however, could be public lack of awareness.

The Rooneys first read about green burials in 2008 when Woodlands first opened on the Island. They had thought green burials would be available in the Lower Mainland by now and Leanne said she was surprised it hasn’t caught on.

Despite the distance, Leanne said choosing Woodlands for her husband was the right decision.

When she visited the site, she was struck by the natural setting and remembered thinking it will one day smell like rain-scented forests.

“It felt right this is where John would be,” she recalled.

“It was the most comfortable decision I had to make in this whole process of losing him.”

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ALTERNATIVE GREEN METHODS

Sounds like science fiction, but here are other green methods to dispose of a body after death:

Alkaline hydrolysis. Also referred to as resomation, this procedure involves dissolving the body in a heated, pressurized vat of lye and water, resulting in a sterile liquid that can be used as fertilizer or poured down the drain, and bone ash, which like cremation, can be placed in an urn and given to loved ones. Scottish company Resomation claims the procedure has a carbon footprint 18 times smaller than cremation. It is approved in some U.S. states and in Saskatchewan.

Promession. The process, invented by Swedish company Promessa, involves freeze-drying the body with liquid nitrogen, then using high-amplitude vibrations to shatter it, creating a dry powder. The powder is then sifted through a metal separator that removes mercury and metal surgical parts. The remains can then be buried and turns into compost in about six to 12 months.

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Catriona Hearn is a senior associate at Lees + Associates, a landscape architecture firm that is helping to focus on greener practices in many B.C. cemeteries.

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