

GOING GREEN—MAKING A DIFFERENCE

GREEN BURIAL: FROM CONCEPT TO REALITY

Crash Course: What is Green Burial?

Green burial—almost everyone has heard of it but few people can state with confidence what it really is. Like many environmental initiatives, the concept of green burial has evolved to mean many things, and take many forms. The level of “greenness” varies, as does the motivation of those who promote green burial, and those who choose it for their final disposition.

Also known as “natural burial,” “woodland burial,” and “country burial,” green burial is based on minimizing the impact of human burial on the environment. In practice, this means people are buried according to the following principles:

- the body is not embalmed;
- the deceased is placed in a fully biodegradable container (a casket or shroud made of natural materials);
- burial does not include a grave liner, vault or crypt;
- the gravesite is allowed to re-vegetate to a naturalized state, and
- individual grave markers are either not used or are very discreet.



The Woodlands, at Royal Oak Burial Park, Victoria BC – Canada's first public cemetery to offer green burial

Where did the idea come from?

Green burial is the oldest form of disposition. It is still practiced – in some form – by many aboriginal peoples and religious faiths to this day. The modern green burial movement began in Europe in the mid-1990s out of a desire for a social, economic and environmentally-oriented interment option. Contemporary green burial differs from ancient, traditional practices through its underlying, conscious desire to minimize the energy used in the interment process, and to maintain and improve the environment in which we live. There are now 200 green burial sites open or at the planning stage in the UK. In Canada, cemeteries in Victoria, BC, Lower Sackville, NS, and Cobourg, ON have opened green burial sections in recent years.

What's different for the Cemetery?

Green burial offers a creative approach for cemeteries interested in expanding their interment options and employing more sustainable practices.

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Operationally, ongoing site maintenance needs will be minimized with reduced irrigation demands, the elimination of pesticides and herbicides, and a less frequent mowing regime. The use of a special shoring “box” during grave excavation eliminates the potential for intrusion into existing, adjacent graves.

Records management can be ensured using subsurface, standard metal marker blocks that can be easily located, or a GIS/GPS value can be assigned to each lot.

The benefits of green burial for a cemetery include:

- Reduced maintenance costs, both in labour and resources.
- Lot layout that is equally efficient to conventional burial.
- The creation of a naturalized green space in the long term.
- Pricing comparable to a basic casket lot (based on the experience of Royal Oak in Victoria, BC).
- With double depth and cremation interments, additional revenue can be generated over time.
- Enhanced use of an edge location or buffer zone in the cemetery.

What's different for Funeral Directors?

With green burial, Funeral Directors will experience a quicker turnaround from first-call to burial, due to the requirement for no embalming. Requests for biodegradable products may include both full body (caskets, shrouds) and containers for ash interments. More graveside services may be offered, including family involvement in the funeral, such as filling in the grave by hand or participating in the planting of the grave surface after the burial.

Moving from Concept to Reality – Green Burial at Royal Oak Burial Park

Since becoming Canada's first public cemetery to offer green burial in 2008, the Royal Oak Burial Park in Victoria, BC has performed 60 “body” burials—an average of two per month at *The Woodlands*.

It is important to note that the traditional burial rate at the cemetery has not been affected by the availability of the green burial option. Since *The Woodlands* opened, the Burial Park is now conducting a *larger* number of total burials each month. For Royal Oak, green burial is ultimately just one more option for customers to choose from when making their final disposition arrangements.

Why Green Burial?

Choosing a means and a place of disposition is a profound, personal choice that eventually faces every individual and family. Providing for green burial demonstrates the desire to respond to the changing needs of the community, including:

- Being seen as a “leader” by advancing sustainable practices in your community;
- Providing a service for the community and an option that families want, and
- Building a proactive image for the profession.



Respecting the “green family,” and addressing their needs, is likely to become a more integral part of the property manager and Funeral Director's roles in the coming years.