

Green burials a growing choice

Victoria's Royal Oak Burial Park leading the way

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VICTORIA — Green burials are an growing trend in funeral service and will have a significant impact in the future, says Stephen Olson, executive director of Royal Oak Burial Park and Crematorium in Victoria, B.C.

The natural practice was dismissed as a fad in some circles when it first emerged in Great Britain in the mid-1990s, but is now the preferred choice of growing numbers of families on Vancouver Island and throughout British Columbia.

Since opening its first green site in 2008, Royal Oak has provided 68 natural burials and sold another 100 pre-arranged services to families wanting a simple and quick interment for philosophical, religious or cultural reasons.

"A little under 70 green burials might not seem like much right now," says Olson. "We're doing two or three green burials a month now, but that comes in a marketplace where cremation sits around 92 per cent of all dispositions. Green burials are starting to replace some of the cremations and we expect this shift to continue and even grow in the years to come.

"It will look completely different in 10 years. It's the younger generation, the next generation that will be making funeral arrangements.

"We believe this will appeal to them in greater numbers."

Green burials involve no embalming, with the body going directly into the ground with no liner or vault of any type. Bodies can be interred in just a shroud or in a fully biodegradable casket. When the



A natural burial mound at Royal Oak Burial Park in Victoria, B.C.

grave is filled, it is then allowed to return to its natural landscape.

Olson likens green burial choices to a middle-of-the-road option for families uncomfortable with either simple cremation dispositions or traditional burials.

"You have to appreciate green burials are really nothing new. It's the oldest form of disposition that human civilization has used," he says.

Eighty per cent of the people who have chosen a green burial option at Royal Oak had originally planned for a cremation.

"A family will say, 'We always wanted burial, but we were never really happy with the conventional form of burial.' The simpler, more natural option resonates with them at a very fundamental level," says Olson.

"We're seeing more and more people looking for something different, something more natural, something simpler. They want this final choice to reflect their personal values — environmental, religious, ethnic. It can be a combination of all of those things."

The cemetery's green burials have ranged from a 93-year-old environmen-

talist to the four-month-old daughter of organic farmers in the province's interior.

The first green burial at Royal Oak in 2008 was a 93-year-old Vancouver Island woman who had been a lifelong environmentalist. Her service is one of Olson's fondest memories in his career.

"She had lived her life as a true, authentic environmentalist. She never owned a car, she walked everywhere, grew enough food over the summer to stock her pantry for the winter. She lived

as environmentally-friendly a life as a person could in our day and age. She had expressed a desire that her death stay in keeping with her life. When she heard about the green burial option about two years before her death, she changed her plans immediately.

"When the family came to make the arrangements, they told us, 'We think she stayed alive until you had the site ready.'

"It was a beautiful example of a person who sincerely wanted her last act to reflect the life she had lived and the values she had subscribed to. The family said she died knowing she would be buried in this manner, and that made facing death a little bit easier. Our entire staff was moved by what we saw that day."

Royal Oak Client Services Supervisor Lorraine Fracy shares the same sentiments.

"My passion for the green burials has been so heightened with the incredible feedback from my families and how the opportunity to be so hands-on was so healing for them," she says.

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"For a mom, dad and seven-year-old brother to tuck their beautiful four-year-old into our soil, plant ground cover where she lay and get some peace from all that. They were so trusting in our guidance ... it doesn't get much better than that."

Two Vancouver Island women came to see Olson in 2000 and inquired if Royal Oak would consider offering green burials. The women, who had been to other area cemeteries, were well informed about green burials in Britain and asked if Royal Oak might consider offering the option.

The request came at a time when Royal Oak, which opened in 1923, was in the initial phase of a master plan for developing unused land in the cemetery.

Olson immediately saw that many areas in the 134-acre cemetery were suitable for green burials.

"We had to think differently about these areas, the layout or topography or location in a forested area of undeveloped land. We have land that might not be usable for traditional burial, but works very nicely for green burial.

"We spent a fair amount of time before we settled on the model we did. We did a lot of background work before we created the first burial site. We wanted to get it right."

Green burials are also presently available at Union Cemetery in Cobourg, Ont. and Meadowvale Cemetery in Brampton, Ont.

Some British green burial sites don't allow markers of any sort, but Royal Oak opted for six larger communal markers where families can add a name if they desire.

"All the way along, it was a positive experience, whether it was for us at the cemetery, or the support we got from the community, or the support we got from the families. It has been a positive experience all the way through," says Olson.

He said the Royal Oak ground staff was initially worried about doing green burials but now prefer them because they can be done more efficiently. Royal Oak strives to limit the equipment and fuel



Stephen Olson and Lorraine Fracy have been touched by green burials they have arranged.

used in the green burials, opening and closing the site with a small backhoe that uses bio-fuel.

"People are pragmatic. They understand some things are just a function of efficiency," Olson says. "We assure families that use of equipment will be kept to an absolute minimum."

Royal Oak presents the green funeral option as just one of the full range of funeral services families can consider. While it is not for everyone, Olson says many people are not aware of the natural option and quickly embrace it.

"They often say they didn't even know they could do that and they are happy to have another choice. After their service, they're often the best advocates for green burial."

Families are encouraged to select plant material that will eventually cover the grave. They take part in planting indigenous plants which range from ground cover to small shrubs and a tree in some instances.

The green option has made for better use of the available space at Royal Oak. It allows for more internments in a given area because roads can eventually be removed as the space is returned to a natural state. It also lends itself to using space in tucked-away corners that are even more appealing to families wanting a complete return to nature.

"I've been in this business for a long time and I can't remember any one thing that got such a positive reaction from the community," says Olson. "Just offering this to families, watching their reaction, seeing them embrace the opportunity to

participate in the whole process in a unique and rewarding fashion is great from our cemetery's point of view."

Olson says Royal Oak is receiving calls from other cemeteries around Canada about the possibility of expanding their services to include natural burials.

"I think people are still waiting to see how our experience works out," he says. "I tell them, if they have the space available and want to do something different, something their community will react positively to, then, by all means, find a way to offer green burials."