

# Demand up for Earth-friendly burials

Posted by [jmcgover](#) September 20, 2008 20:40PM

It makes sense that a person with environmental sensibilities would want their last wishes to reflect a green-conscious lifestyle.

And a growing awareness of the environmental impacts of conventional end-of-life rituals has created the beginnings of a movement that could change traditional burial and funeral practices.

Green, or natural, burial does not use chemical embalming, metal and composite caskets or concrete burial vaults. It focuses on returning to the Earth with minimal preparation, with bodies often placed in a simple shroud or a wooden casket.

Often, graves are signified with natural markers such as trees or rocks. In some cases, GPS devices are used for families to find where their loved one is buried, rather than using any visible marker. The same methods can be used to mark a site where ashes are interred.

Green burial is the topic of a two-part workshop co-sponsored by [Washtenaw County's Blueprint for Aging](#) and [Matthaei Botanical Gardens](#) that begins at the gardens Tuesday.

"There hasn't been much focus on what happens after someone dies," said Rachel Dewees, pilot project coordinator for the Blueprint for Aging. "It just seems it's kind of accepted and assumed that the conventional way is the only way."

## 'Woodland burial'

According to the [Green Burial Council](#), an advocacy and certification group, enough concrete is buried every year to build a highway from Detroit to New York City.

And more than 800,000 gallons of formaldehyde-based preservatives are also put into the ground every year, along with millions of board-feet of wood and tons of metals and other materials.

Green burial has taken off in the United Kingdom, where it is generally referred to as "woodland burial."

Cremation, which is considered more environmentally friendly than traditional burial, has historically been popular there.

But some communities around crematories began having environmental problems because of the mercury from dental fillings that was vaporized during the cremation process, said [Erika Nelson](#), a licensed funeral director who teaches mortuary science at Wayne State University.

That helped the idea of woodland burial take off, said Nelson, a resident of Ypsilanti.

The first woodland burial site opened in Britain in 1993.

In the United States, there are a handful of green or natural burial cemeteries, including one in Marin County, Calif., and one in South Carolina.

In Michigan, there are plans for a site in the Metamora area, and a church in Muir, northwest of Lansing, is also opening a green cemetery.

So far, the lack of sites is the biggest obstacle to the movement, those involved say. And there are rules and perceptions about what's legal that also stand in the way, Nelson said.

## Learn more

- **What:** Earth-friendly funerals and burials.
- **When:** Tuesday and Thursday, 7 to 9 p.m.
- **Where:** Matthaei Botanical Gardens, 1800 N. Dixboro Road.
- **Registration:** It's required and can be made online at [www.lsa.umich.edu/mbg](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/mbg) or by calling 734-647-7600 during business hours. Those hours are Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. The office is closed Mondays.

For example, a state rule requires embalming of bodies after 48 hours. But the rule does not account for refrigeration options in cases where more time is needed to prepare services and burial or cremation. And, according to her research, the rule is unenforceable.

But some funeral homes adopt the rule as policy, and families may decide to embalm rather than feeling that there is a clock ticking while they make preparations, she said.

"There is a lot of still interesting work that needs to be done, and a fair amount of tension around some issues," said Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council.

"You have an industry that has had an enormously adversarial relationship with the people who have been trying to reform it. This doesn't have to be threatening, and we want to find a way to help make that happen."

### **Paradigm is shifting**

Many in the funeral home industry have begun to recognize that there will be a demand for a more natural end-of-life ritual, experts say.

The Green Burial Council has certified some 75 death-care providers this year alone, Sehee said. And one-third are in Michigan.

"Consumers are starting to understand their options and this is creating a dramatic paradigm shift in the death care industry," he said.

"It has always been to preserve and protect the body, to prevent decomposition from taking place. This concept is completely different. Ashes return to ashes. And this is the tradition that most of the world has used for thousands and thousands of years."

Many more are considering the trend, too.

Washtenong Memorial Park and Mausoleum on Whitmore Lake Road, now under new ownership, has been in discussions about creating a green burial area in part of its existing park, said manager Bill Wichman.

Ron Guidebeck of Highland Park Cemetery in Ypsilanti said one the cemetery's board members is researching green burial options.

"What interests us is if there is any trend in funeral services, we're interested in being aware of it and providing for the needs of our communities," said Pat Lynch, president of [Lynch and Sons](#) funeral home in Clawson, which has a sister home in Plymouth. Both are certified by the Green Burial Council.

"It's not being done in great numbers yet, but it will be. More and more people of this and upcoming generations will be sensitive to the environment."

Phil Douma, executive director of the [Michigan Funeral Directors Association](#), said members were beginning to get inquiries about green funerals and burial options.

"Funeral directors have always sought to accommodate family values and priorities," he said. "So our members will ... find ways to serve them.

Muslim and Jewish traditions have long required such simple burial practices, without preservative embalming. The idea has always been to return to the Earth, said Nelson.

But that's not the case for the last 100 or so years among American Christians, she said.

### **Embalming not needed**

Embalming first came into practice during the Civil War, when the bodies of Union soldiers had to be shipped a long way home. It gave families a chance to view the remains.

But in an era of refrigeration and dry ice, embalming is no longer necessary to preserve a body safely for a memorial service. However, Nelson notes, cooling does not impart the same cosmetic effects that embalming can, and that's very important to some.

As for large caskets that use many materials, many people have traditionally felt they must provide the best and the most expensive for the deceased, she said, even when it will only be viewed briefly.

Nelson and others say as baby boomers and the generations behind them begin to die, green burial practices will become far more common. These are generations for whom environmental values have been more in the forefront; as a last request, it stands to reason that people will want a low-impact end-of-life ritual.

When Ayron Smith-Douglas of Ypsilanti lost her partner, Billie Edwards, to a brain tumor in 1995, her family's focus was on having a simple, family-centered, at-home visitation followed by cremation. She then scattered her ashes in a natural area.

"She came from a farm," she said. "I came from the Rocky Mountains. Nature, in a sense, was our mother. ... We came from Mother Nature and we're going back to Mother Nature."

The Green Burial Council's Sehee and others say a dying person's wish is theirs and their family's alone, and should be respected whatever it is, whether it's a traditional burial or a green one.

Still, he thinks the scales are tipping in favor of simpler and more natural death care. "To be honest with you, supply is not going to be able to keep up with demand."

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Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

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