

Green 'death care'

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George Darte is keen to green his personal life.

He's also professionally interested in eco-friendly death.

The Prius-driving St. Catharines funeral director recently began shopping around for an energy audit for his home.

"At some point I thought, 'Hey, why not do it for the funeral home, too?'" he said of the Carlton Street business bearing his family name. "Ideally, I'd like to shrink the carbon footprint of my business, too."

Darte is particularly interested in cutting his greenhouse gas emissions, but he knows the business of "death care" is slowly adjusting to a more eco-concerned clientele.

Green funerals. Natural burials.

Terms you may not have heard a decade ago, at least not in North America.

Darte said he doesn't routinely get eco-oriented requests from his clients, but he knows "it's coming."

He follows the latest industry buzz and is prepared, for instance, to accommodate requests for more biodegradable "peg and dowel" wood caskets, which don't need metal hinges or staples and forgo chemical stains.

The green funeral movement boosted its profile in Niagara last year when Smith's Funeral Homes was certified by the U.S.-based Green Burial Council.

The company, which has a funeral home in Grimsby, expects a growing number of clients to ask for eco-friendlier death care, said environmental stewardship coordinator Jennifer Rayworth.

Rayworth estimated about 15 per cent of Smith's clients now ask "for some sort of green-related service."

More biodegradable caskets and urns are popular, and are cost comparable to more traditional varieties.

A newer environmentally friendly funeral practice attracting a lot of research is "eco-embalming."

Traditional embalming fluid typically contains the toxic chemical compound formaldehyde.

Darte said he's watching research on formaldehyde-free embalming fluids with interest, but in his opinion, "it's not quite there yet."

Rayworth said the greener options are workable, but visitations "need to occur within a shorter time period."

Other eco-innovations after death include carbon-less cremation and natural burials, which could include hand-digging of graves, trees or shrubs as markers and even site suitability studies.

A surprising number of people are willing to make the extra effort, said Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council.

Sehee said a national poll in the U.S. in 2007 suggested 21 per cent of adults over the age of 50 "preferred the concept of greener burials."

Sehee encourages funeral directors to consider new green options, but stressed no funeral tradition is "wrong."

"It's a very sensitive topic for many people," he said. "We just want people to be aware that there are greener alternatives."

Smith's funeral home was the first in Canada to hook up with the U. S.-based council. Green-certified cemeteries are also relatively rare in Canada -Sehee knows of one in B.C. and another in Cobourg.

"But the idea is going mainstream much more quickly than we anticipated," he said. "The idea of returning to the earth as part of that natural cycle, the idea can actually provide a great deal of solace."