

Pushing up daisies

Eco-friendly funerals that protect green spaces

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Preserving and protecting life is a major motivator when it comes to making environmentally responsible decisions.

But a growing number of people are beginning to consider the impact that their death could have on the environment, too.

"Death and the funeral process is a very personal thing," says Kristopher Bouck, a former geologist and funeral director with MacCoubrey Funeral Homes in Cobourg, Ont. "People who are concerned for the environment or have lived a green lifestyle may wish to carry that tradition into their funerals."

Bouck points to the fact that traditional embalming uses formaldehydes and other toxins that eventually make their way into the groundwater. Concrete vaults and steel liners use huge amounts of raw materials. Cremation uses vast amounts of fossil fuels and can release toxic gases into the environment.

"Most people want to reduce the impact of their burial decision, once they realize the environmental consequences," said Kim Bilous, of the Natural Burial Association. "Choosing a green burial option is one final chance to make a difference."

The Natural Burial Association suggests imagining what you would like your final resting place to be like.

"Would you prefer to be surrounded by tombstones and lawns, or by glades and meadows full of birds and butterflies? If your answer is glades and meadows, then a natural burial ground is the place for you."

While Britain and the U.S. have both been providing more environmentally friendly options for several years, the idea of green funerals is relatively new in Canada.

To date only two cemeteries in the country offer green burial options: Cobourg Union Cemetery in Cobourg, Ont., and the Royal Oak Burial Park in Victoria, B.C.

Bilous says that this makes it even more important that we talk about it.

"Consumers can help by asking for natural burial options when funeral arrangements are being made, either as pre-planning or for a loved one," said Bilous.

The idea of green funerals is to provide a simple alternative to traditional burials by minimizing the use of raw materials and toxic materials, while providing a lasting green legacy.

Bodies are interred as quickly as possible, eliminating the need for embalming. Caskets are made from natural wood products or even cardboard boxes, and are buried in shallower graves where the natural process of decomposition returns nutrients to the Earth. In lieu of traditional gravestones, family members are invited to plant native wildflowers.

A secondary benefit is that unlike traditional cemeteries, which are located away from environmentally sensitive areas because of the potential for groundwater pollution, green burial sites can help to preserve and protect green spaces.

"Our vision is to provide an environmentally friendly alternative to conventional burials in Canada," said Bilous, "and to also support land conservation."

Now that's a lasting legacy.

7 THINGS YOU CAN DO

Even if you don't have a green cemetery near you, you can still reduce the impact by taking the following steps:

1. Plan ahead, so your family and executors know your wishes for simplicity.
2. Include a line in your will that states, "I would prefer to be buried in a natural burial site as available. Without a natural burial site available, please prepare my body for rest without the use of toxic chemicals, and use an easily biodegradable casket without a concrete vault."
3. Choose a simple box of local sustainably harvested wood (such as Forest Stewardship Council certified wood) or cardboard. Check out Northern Casket's Enviro Casket.
4. Consider other options, including a burial shroud or simple basket.
5. For cremation, ask that your teeth with mercury fillings be removed to avoid mercury release into the air.
6. Consider offsetting your greenhouse gas emissions from the cremation with carbon credits.
7. In lieu of flowers, ask that donations be made to a land conservation or environmental organization.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF TRADITIONAL FUNERALS

- The average embalmed body contains more than 15 litres of formaldehyde.
- In North America this adds up to more than 4 million litres being buried every year.
- In one year, the amount of metal used for vault and coffin production in North America could build the Golden Gate Bridge.
- The concrete used during the same period could build a two lane highway between Toronto and Montreal - and back again!
- A 10-acre cemetery contains: Enough wood to construct more than 40 homes, 1,000 tonnes of casket steel, 20,000 tonnes of concrete for vaults.
- Traditional cemeteries have groomed lawns and gardens that require pesticides and fertilizers to be properly maintained.

A HOT TOPIC: CREMATION

- The box containing the body is incinerated at temperatures ranging from 760 to 1150C (1400 to 2100F).
- The average cremation consumes 27 litres of gas.
- During the cremation process, a large part of the body (especially the organs) and other soft tissue is vaporized and oxidized due to the heat, and the gases are discharged through the exhaust system.
- Emissions include nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, mercury vapour, hydrogen fluoride, hydrogen chloride, and other heavy metals, including persistent organic pollutants.
- The United Nations estimates that crematoria contribute 0.2% of the global emission of dioxins and furans and are considered the second largest source of airborne mercury in Europe.