

## **The green final frontier: eco-burial**

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Going green has become a cradle-to-grave passion for many Canadians. But perhaps the hardest time to adopt environmentally friendly practices has been at the end of life itself, though some in the funeral and burial business are trying to catch up.

The industry has been slow to change, acknowledges Jennifer Rayworth, environmental stewardship co-ordinator for Smith's Funeral Homes, based in Burlington, Ont.

But Smith's, which operates four funeral homes, last year became Canada's first such business to be certified by the U.S.-based Green Burial Council, an independent, non-profit organization that encourages eco-friendly end-of-life practices.

Traditional funerals and burials are anything but environmentally friendly. A typical cemetery buries 4,500 litres of formaldehyde-based embalming fluid, 97 tonnes of steel, 2,000 tonnes of concrete and 56,000 board feet of tropical hardwood in every acre of space. Add to that the tonnes of cut flowers and carbon emissions from mourners' vehicles.

If you think cremation reduces your carbon footprint, think again: it's estimated a single cremation uses 92 cubic metres of natural gas – enough to supply the average Canadian home for 12.5 days – and releases 0.8 to 5.9 grams of mercury.

Since Smith's began promoting its green option last May, about 15 per cent of customers have asked how they can bury a loved one in an eco-friendly manner, Ms. Rayworth says. Smith's offers these suggestions: biodegradable caskets made from Canadian wood, cardboard, wicker or bamboo, materials that are easily replenished; plant-based embalming fluids, or no embalming at all; recycled paper for programs, hymn sheets and guest books; carpooling or hired coaches for the funeral procession; online memorials for out-of-towners; organically produced flowers, food and beverages; donations to environmental causes; and burial in natural cemeteries.

That last one has proved particularly tricky. Only two natural cemeteries are certified by Canada's Natural Burial Association – one in Victoria and one in Cobourg, Ont., an hour east of Toronto.

A cemetery that is worth emulating is Greensprings, in Ithaca, N.Y., says Janet McCausland, a co-founder of the association. Plots are hand-dug and graves are not marked by large headstones carted from miles away but by trees or shrubs, or flat stones or plaques, for those who wish to mark a specific plot at all.

The cemetery resembles a pleasant meadow, she says. Next to the burial ground, space is designated for other passive purposes such as weddings and an annual picnic.

Ms. McCausland says of the association, "We want to educate people to know there's another choice."

Choice is what it's all about, agrees Kristopher Bouck, a funeral director at MacCoubrey Funeral Home in Cobourg, which has access to the natural burial area of that town's Union Cemetery. The cemetery is an old one, but about 100 plots have been preserved recently for natural burials, and there's room for growth.

The option of immediate burial without embalming has always been available, Mr. Bouck says. But eco-burial at MacCoubrey has expanded to include environmental embalming, caskets made from sustainable Canadian wood and finished with natural stains and linen or non-bleached cotton interiors, and hand-dug graves.

"These options are not for everybody," Mr. Bouck says. For instance, a body that's been eco-embalmed must be buried within a day or two.

"Both clients and funeral homes are slow to change," he says. "Established practice becomes our comfort zone. It's another option for people and it will build over the next 10 years."

An environmental funeral costs nearly as much as a traditional one, although eco-friendly coffins start at about \$495, compared with \$895 for the traditional.

Both MacCoubrey and Smith's funeral homes see public education as an important part of their jobs. MacCoubrey, which also operates a funeral home in nearby Colborne, publicizes its green option on its website. Smith's holds seminars and is putting the finishing touches on a brochure that will advise those interested in an eco-funeral.

Ms. Rayworth says the most popular options at Smith's are environmentally friendly caskets and urns, but she believes more consumers will soon demand non-formaldehyde embalming and alternatives to cremation, which is used in 56 per cent of Canadian burials.

These cremation options stand to make a big impact. There are two alternatives that can be adapted to human burial: resomation, which breaks down the body in a mixture of water and alkali-based substance, with the resulting material then dried into a powder; and promession, which uses liquid nitrogen to freeze-dry the body, then ultrasonic vibration to turn it to dust. In both cases, the resulting material may be placed in an urn.

Resomation could be available in Canada by summer, with the Toronto-based Transition Science Inc. teaming up with cemetery company Park Lawn LP to install the first unit, says Transition president Allen Bessel. Mr. Bessel expects the price to be similar to that of cremation.

The company is in talks with Toronto and Ontario about licensing and building, and once the service is available, Mr. Bessel believes eco-conscious Canadians will take to the concept quickly. He hopes every major Canadian city will have a unit in three to four years.

"Canada has some of the greenest citizens on the planet," Mr. Bessel says. "Seventy-five per cent of Canadians are making different choices about how they live to save the environment. There is a pent-up demand for this. The opportunity is huge."