



# Shades of Green Burial

When it comes to burials, is it “all green” or “no green,” and nothing in between? There is no doubt that we need to protect Mother Nature and it is important to us that our loved ones are protected also. Contrary to some beliefs, there are ways we can protect both the environment and our loved ones; not sacrificing one for the other. Most green burials include the following standards: no burial vaults, no embalming, and no markers. In their initial enthusiasm, new movements may go too far in the opposite direction, just to be different from what they oppose. Such “green cemeteries” may really be green but will they really be cemeteries? I think there is a way to compromise, and discover different “shades of green” in burial.

When it comes to burial choices, a lined and sealed concrete burial vault is most definitely an environmentally friendly option. Its main two purposes are to protect the contained deceased from outside elements and protect the surrounding soil from any chemicals. A properly sealed burial vault keeps everything from escaping out into the earth, including embalming fluid. It also prohibits anything from entering the burial vault, thus protecting the loved one from any animals or outside pollutants. A burial vault is made from concrete – which is made from cement, ingredients mined from the earth and Mother Nature’s own water. Burial vaults aren’t considered “green” in the eyes of some, but when you really break it down; a burial vault is actually protecting the environment.

If a burial vault is going to protect the environment from any chemicals, then the effects of embalming should not be an issue. Even though embalming is not required by law, (with the exceptions of special cases involving contagious diseases in which it is required) no public visitation with an open casket can take place without embalming. Don’t your families deserve to see their loved ones one last time to say their final goodbyes? As a result of not embalming, your family could be missing the only opportunity they have to remember the time they had with their loved one, celebrate memories and heal emotionally after time.

A natural burial ground also does not allow the use of grave markers. However, the attempt to leave a longer mark than your body’s lifespan goes beyond saving the environment. We need to also sell the view that the well-being of the individual and collective human race should not be forgotten, for the green burial movement only sells to the public its view of emphasizing the earth’s well-being. A memorial not only marks the final resting place of a person, but it can now tell a story with engraved pictures. Markers can be so much more

than a text-only headstone. Flat bronze markers also make for a beautiful cemetery; a place to go in remembrance of them.

Without markers, graves in green cemeteries need to be mapped with GPS systems. I worry that current technologies like GPS are not going to be reliable years from now. It is hard to be sure that this software will be compatible for centuries, when software generations are measured in months or years. With the potential obsolescence of GPS technology, will we have a lost generation when families go looking for their relatives decades down the road? Will we know where to take our grandchildren, and will they know where to take their children to go visit us?

Just as there are hundreds of ways to go green during our daily lives, there are many ways to go green at a funeral. As with any event, much of the environmental impact is in the details. You can still make a funeral greener by incorporating the following practices into the gathering.

**Programs:** Use recycled paper for programs or hymn sheets.

**Flowers:** Source any flowers from organic, local growers.

**Procession:** Make arrangements for carpooling from location to location during the funeral.

**Refreshments:** If the deceased was an environmentalist, the chances are they enjoyed local, organic food. If refreshments are being served, it makes sense then to look closely at where they come from.

It is important to explain to your families all of their options, from regular ground burial, green burial, cremation and every “shade of green” in between. We need to remember as to why we have funerals in the first place. It isn’t really about the burial vault or the environment, it is about honoring and remembering a loved one, and allowing your family and friends to grieve and begin to heal. It has been said that a good funeral is one in which the deceased is honored, the bereaved comforted and the memory is sustained. While I believe that to be true, I also believe that the way to give your families the BEST funeral possible, is to protect the environment while also protecting their loved ones. **FBA**

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