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Is a Green Burial Right for You?

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In its purest sense, a green burial—also called a natural burial—entails wrapping an [unembalmed](#) human body in an eco-friendly, biodegradable shroud and burying the body in a natural setting in a manner that creates the least impact on the environment. In current practice around the world, however, a green burial can comprise one of many "shades of green."



Frank Krahmer/Getty Images

Lacking a uniform standard or definition, "being green" is currently in the eye of the beholder concerning the burial of a deceased human being. Explore some of the differences in the various forms of bodily disposition and the options available to help you determine if green burial is right for you—however you wish to define it.

Pick Your Shade of Green

According to the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), a not-for-profit trade group representing funeral service professionals, a green burial occurs when "the body is buried, without embalming, in a natural setting; any shroud or casket that is used must be biodegradable, nontoxic, and of sustainable material; traditional standing headstones are not permitted. Instead, flat rocks, plants or trees may serve as grave markers."

NFDA adds that green burial "may also simply mean burial without embalming, in a biodegradable casket without a vault, when permitted by a cemetery."

The Green Burial Council (GBC), a non-profit organization that encourages environmentally sustainable deathcare, takes the standard of a green burial further, however: "Green burial is a way of caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact that furthers legitimate ecological aims such as the conservation of natural resources, reduction of carbon emissions, protection of worker health, and the restoration and/or preservation of habitat."

Similar to how one household that merely recycles aluminum cans might still consider itself green versus another household that utilizes geothermal power, the threshold defining green burial is ultimately up to *you* and how much you wish to minimize your carbon footprint and/or help the environment.

Traditional Burial vs. Green Burial

In general, a [traditional funeral](#) followed by ground burial involves the use of formaldehyde-based embalming fluid, as well as the obvious need for land use when burying a casket or coffin.

In contrast, green burial favors the use of refrigeration, dry ice, non-formaldehyde-based embalming fluid, or some other "natural" method of preserving the body between the time of death and the funeral or memorial service. Holding the service soon after the death (within 48 hours) also minimizes the need for preservation. This reduces the exposure of funeral home workers to formaldehyde, as well as its leaching into the environment.

If a "container" (casket or coffin) is used, it should be crafted from a natural, biodegradable and, ideally, sustainable material. No metal fasteners, such as screws or nails, or metal hardware should be used.

And while the burial of a body also requires land use, the use of an eco-friendly, natural, and biodegradable material such as linen or wool for a shroud or cardboard, wicker, or other sustainable material for a casket or coffin encourages rapid decomposition and the return of the body's nutrients into the soil.

Finally, a green-burial setting is not maintained by a landscaping crew but instead appears as it would naturally. A traditional grave marker or headstone is generally not allowed. Instead, some natural-burial cemeteries allow the use of a small, unpolished, flat stone to mark a gravesite.

Survivors may choose to have the deceased's name and birth/death dates engraved upon it. Other green-burial cemeteries insist that only a tree (existing or planted at the time of death) may be used, or the location of the gravesite noted using global positioning system (GPS) coordinates.

One large drawback of green burial is that there are limited options for where it is allowed. The nearest green cemetery might be quite a distance away, resulting in more greenhouse emissions to transport the deceased to it, as well as travel for mourners at the time of burial and in the future. Traditional burial is usually available closer to where the deceased is located.

Cremation vs. Green Burial

Cremation, long considered an environmentally friendly or eco-conscious choice of bodily disposition versus traditional ground burial, does not qualify as "green" according to the NFDA or GBC. While cremation generally reduces land use, the cremation process itself can, potentially, generate airborne emissions that harm the atmosphere. However, like green burial, embalming is not necessary before cremation.

Because cremated remains do not necessarily need to be interred in a cemetery, land use is reduced versus traditional burial (and scattering cremated remains obviously uses no land). Some might argue, however, that cremation precludes the natural decomposition of the body, preventing it from benefitting the natural ecosystem.

How Green Is Your Valley?

If you seek to minimize your impact on the natural environment after you die, then your best choice is to research your options ahead of time in order to plan the burial that means the most to you. Fortunately, interest in green or natural burial is growing so the amount of information available is increasing. For example, the GBC offers a convenient planning guide to help you organize your thoughts and determine how you define a green burial. The [Natural End](#) offers a map of natural burial providers in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia.

Once you have envisioned what you want, you should share your plan with your family or loved ones. You can also discuss your wishes with a funeral director, cemetery counselor or other end-of-life planner.

Article Sources

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1. National Funeral Directors Association. [Green funerals and burial](#).
2. Green Burial Council. [FAQs: Green burial defined](#).