



A guide to  
creating a  
farewell that's  
more meaningful  
for you, those you  
love and the planet

# a Greener Funeral

[aGreenerFuneral.org](http://aGreenerFuneral.org)



## GREEN IS FOR FUNERALS TOO

*The environmentally-conscious “green” lifestyle may be one of the most beneficial movements in the world today, yet most people only associate green with living. For people who want to preserve the environment, the growing practice of green funerals and burials presents a way to make the end of life more meaningful too.*

*More than half of Americans now say that they are concerned about the environment. 21% of Americans over the age of 50 would prefer an eco-friendly, end-of-life ritual, according to a 2007 AARP national research report. For these people, green represents an ethical and philosophical choice.*



## WHAT IS A GREEN FUNERAL?

Webster’s online dictionary defines the word “green” (as it pertains to products and services) as “not harmful to the environment.” A green funeral is generally any end-of-life ritual that is as harmless as possible for the environment. This can include burial in a green or “natural” cemetery.

At death - the final rite of passage - we use ritual to celebrate, honor and preserve the memory of a life. Many environmentally-conscious families today seek a mix of traditional and green funeral options. “A Greener Funeral” (and its companion Web guide [aGreenerFuneral.org](http://aGreenerFuneral.org)) have been created to help you learn more about the subject and plan a greener funeral for yourself or a loved one.

## A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The modern green funeral, also known as a “natural funeral” or “eco-funeral,” is old and new at the same time. End-of-life rituals, including funerals and memorial services, are among the most significant practices of every culture on earth. These rituals have evolved over thousands of years of human history. Many of the practices associated with greener funerals, such as shrouds, have long been in use by some groups.

Greener funeral practices are often compatible with the traditions of the major religions. Judaism and Islam, for example, have traditionally called for shrouds or simple wooden caskets and no embalming. Hinduism and Buddhism allow cremation, while traditional Catholicism, Judaism and Islam do not. Consult with your spiritual leader to see which greener funeral rituals honor your religious tradition.



## Green and Greener

At [aGreenerFuneral.org](http://aGreenerFuneral.org) we believe that green is in the eye of the beholder.

For some, green means riding a bicycle, eating locally-grown organic vegetables and living off the electrical grid. For others green is driving less, using less electricity and taking cloth bags to the grocery store. That's why we use the terms "green" and "greener" in this guide. We think that, big step or little step, whatever you do to preserve and protect our environment is a good thing in life, and in death.

be refrigerated instead of embalmed with toxic chemicals. If refrigeration isn't available, ice or dry ice can be used to preserve the body until burial.

Also, the use of biodegradable funeral products (caskets, shrouds, urns) made of sustainable, eco-friendly materials minimizes the impact on the planet.

### TO EMBALM OR NOT

Embalming, a relatively new practice in America, became common during the Civil War when it was used to preserve the bodies of dead soldiers so that they could be buried at homes far from the

The essence of a greener funeral is reducing its environmental impact. Many people find that in doing so they also make the funeral more natural and meaningful for the mourners.

Among the options for a greener funeral is a quick or "direct" burial without a viewing or visitation service. This eliminates the need for preserving the body, but the burial may still be accompanied by a funeral or memorial service. If you wish a viewing, the body can



battlefield. The practice became well-known when President Abraham Lincoln's body was embalmed for its formal trip from Washington, D.C. to Springfield, Illinois for burial.

Embalming has become such a common part of American funerals that many people assume that it is required by law.

However, no state or province in

North America automatically demands the embalming of bodies. When preservation of the body is specified by state ordinance, refrigeration, chilling or dry ice can often be substituted for embalming. Special circumstances such as an extended time between death and burial, and transportation of remains on commercial airline flights may necessitate embalming.

Choosing not to embalm is a significant way to have a greener funeral. Embalming fluid is usually comprised of the carcinogenic chemical formaldehyde, which poses health risks to those who work with it. While an embalmed body at a funeral does not present a serious risk to the mourners, doing without embalming is another way to help eliminate the unnecessary use of harsh chemicals that are not eco-friendly. For those who choose embalming, there are now several formaldehyde-free embalming fluids that will adequately preserve the body for up to several weeks.

### CREMATION – USING FEWER RESOURCES

For many years, cremation has been the most common alternative to the traditional funeral. In some regions of America, cremation is chosen for as many as 80% of funerals.



“Journey Aqua”  
urn designed for  
a graceful water  
burial.

Cremation is the reduction of the body to bone fragments through the application of intense heat. The fragments are then finely processed so that they can be placed in an urn for final disposition. It requires no harmful chemicals like those used in the embalming process, and if the remains are scattered, no space in the ground is required.

Cremation uses far fewer resources than almost any other disposition option but it does have an environmental impact. Cremation requires the burning of fossil fuels, and some older cremation facilities use significantly more energy compared to newer ones. Mercury is also emitted when a person with dental amalgam fillings is cremated, but the development of effective filtration devices and the decline in use of dental amalgam fillings will eventually mitigate this problem.

A greener cremation takes additional steps to make the process more eco-friendly, beginning with the use of eco-friendly caskets that do not release harmful chemicals into the atmosphere during the cremation process. Cremated remains may be placed in urns made from materials that break down naturally in the earth, such as Himalayan rock salt or sustainably produced handmade paper.

For water burial there are green urns and containers designed to sink quickly and then dissolve within hours or days, reducing the impact on aquatic life. Families who prefer to disperse cremated remains can use specially-designed, recyclable scattering tubes that allow clean, easy scattering.

Most cemeteries provide a variety of options for cremated remains, including ground spaces, columbaria (above-ground niches) or special gardens for the scattering of the remains. These are also greener options because they use up less space.

## A SMALLER FOOTPRINT

The trend to greener funerals has inspired a variety of new funeral products that are sustainable and eco-friendly. Whether you want to reduce your carbon footprint or simply find a more natural way to go, there are more options than ever before.

### GREENER CASKETS

A casket, because it holds the body of the deceased, is perhaps the central element of the traditional funeral. Choosing a green casket is therefore a significant way to make a funeral more eco-friendly.

At one time typical caskets were simple wooden boxes for the dead. Today they have evolved into sophisticated and highly-finished items that many find wasteful because they use unsustainable or environmentally-un-friendly materials for a short-term purpose and cannot be recycled.

There are more options now, including green caskets made from such sustainable materials as heavy cardboard, wicker (woven from sustainably-grown willow, seagrass and bamboo) and softwoods such as pine. A biodegradable casket is also a greener choice because it will break down more readily in the soil and therefore meets the requirements for burial in a green cemetery. .

Eco-friendly  
wicker caskets are  
suitable for green  
burial and clean  
cremation. Willow  
casket shown  
here.



## BURIAL SHROUDS

Many cultures and religions use or have used shrouds as part of their burial rituals, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism. A shroud is a long piece of cloth, usually natural material such as cotton or linen, which is wrapped around a body after it has been prepared for burial. The shrouded body is usually placed directly in the grave without a casket. This simple method uses a minimum of materials while still honoring the dignity of the deceased during burial.

Most funeral homes can supply traditional shrouds, such as the Jewish “tachrichim,” or they may be obtained through religious organizations. You can also find shrouds from artisans and small businesses in a variety of styles and designs.

## GREENER URNS

The size, shape and materials used vary depending on whether an urn will be used for burial, entombment or display. Traditional materials include ceramic, marble,

## Raw Materials

*Every year more than 90,000 tons of steel are used to make caskets in America. Copper and other metal alloys are also used, but in much smaller amounts. All metals are mined from the earth and are nonrenewable resources. Metal caskets cannot be recycled.*

*Hardwoods such as maple, cherry, black walnut, and redwood, are also used to make traditional caskets. More than 30 million board feet of hardwood lumber are used to build wooden caskets each year. High-end wood caskets are often made from mahogany, an endangered rain forest tree.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Statistics from wikipedia.org, compiled from funeral industry sources

glass, metal, wood, or bronze. Most of these materials degrade extremely slowly, making them unsuitable for a green burial.

A wide variety of biodegradable urns is now available for ground or water burial. They are made from sustainable, recyclable and eco-friendly materials, including rock salt, handmade paper and cornstarch. If desired, these urns may be used for display of the remains, as they will not degrade until buried in the earth or in a body of water. Biodegradable urns designed for water burial will degrade in a matter of hours or days so as to have as little impact on the environment as possible.

Those who wish to place cremated remains in a tomb, columbarium or at home can choose permanent urns such as those made from bamboo.

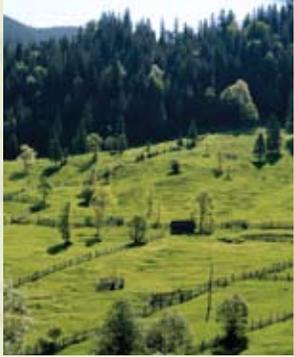
## NEW BURIAL OPTIONS

Green burial is a “new” practice that is really very old because it is based on methods used by some cultures for thousands of years. Green burial means that the body, which is not embalmed, is buried in an eco-friendly casket or shroud in a manner that allows it to return to the earth as quickly as possible. That is why green burial is also called “natural burial” or “eco-burial.”

A green burial may take place in a conventional modern cemetery or in a green cemetery that uses eco-friendly methods. In a green burial, graves are dug by hand and concrete vaults or grave liners are not used. Landscaping consists of native plants and trees that help create or preserve habitat for animals. There are no manicured lawns, eliminating the need for chemicals, irrigation



Urn for permanent keeping, made of bamboo plywood, a sustainable and rapidly renewable resource.



and gas-powered mowers. Trees, natural stones and other materials are used in place of elaborate headstones. Some green cemeteries even use GPS coordinates to “mark” graves.

The first modern green cemetery, also known as a “woodland burial ground” or “natural cemetery” opened in the United Kingdom in the 1990’s. Today there are more than 200 dedicated natural burial grounds in the UK. While there are only a handful of green cemeteries in the United States today, the number is expected to grow with the trend to green burials. Some conventional cemeteries and memorial parks are planning to open sections exclusively for green burial. Green cemeteries are also being used to help protect endangered ecosystems by limiting residential or commercial development.

Even in a conventional cemetery you can still choose a greener burial. Use a green casket or a shroud. If possible, decline the use of a concrete vault or liner. (Vaults and liners are designed to prevent the ground from sinking in when the casket and body decompose. This makes it easier to maintain the manicured, level lawns we associate with modern memorial parks, but it wastes a lot of resources.) Many

## Traditional but with Greener Choices

*Even in a conventional cemetery you can still choose a greener burial. Use a green casket or a shroud. Cremation offers additional greener options.*

conventional cemeteries require either a vault or grave liner, but this practice may change if more people reject it. A greener option is a liner with no bottom, which allows the body or casket to rest in the earth. If you choose cremation, there are additional greener burial options such as:

**Water burial:** Cremated remains are allowed to sink into an ocean, lake or river in a biodegradable container designed to break down within hours or days.

**Scattering:** Cremated remains are dispersed on land or on a body of water. Many cemeteries have dedicated scattering grounds, which provides a convenient place for families to return to when they want to remember their departed.

Note: Water burial and scattering may be governed by federal and local laws. Please consult your funeral professional if you choose one of these options.

Eco-friendly Scattering Tubes are designed and engineered to simplify the scattering process.



## HEADSTONES, TABLETS AND MEMORIALS

The practice of marking graves is an important part of remembering the dead and dealing with loss. The way in which you mark a grave can be a greener choice as well. Natural cemeteries often plant trees or shrubs in place of headstones, tablets and other common markers. Plantings of local flora on or near the grave creates a living memorial and helps create habitat for wildlife.

In a conventional cemetery, choose the minimum size of headstone allowed. Try to find a local monument builder who uses indigenous rather than imported stone, thereby reducing the carbon footprint of production and transportation.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Whether you are a committed environmentalist, a lover of the outdoors, or just want something simple and unique, the trend to green allows every family to celebrate a life in a way that is more meaningful for them and healthier for our planet.

Our companion Web site, **aGreenerFuneral.org**, offers a wealth of additional resources on greener funerals and burials, including:

- Organizations that promote greener funerals and burials
- Links to online videos about greener funerals and burials
- Database of greener funeral & burial providers



*aGreenerFuneral.org is a public service sponsored by Passages International, Inc., a leading provider of environmentally-sustainable caskets, urns, keepsakes and other products for more meaningful, greener funerals. Find us at [www.PassagesInternational.com](http://www.PassagesInternational.com).*

