



A 21st Century Guide to Green Burials

Phaneuf

Funeral Homes & Crematorium

Honoring Loss ~ Celebrating Life



Introduction

Families are going back to basics when deciding on a final resting place for loved ones who have passed away. Biodegradable caskets made of cardboard or biodegradable materials are replacing traditional caskets made of metal or sleek hardwoods. There are other factors that factor into the concept of “green burials,” which is gaining in popularity, but the practice isn’t new to the 21st century.

Aside from the environmentally friendly aspects of green burials, sometimes a simpler, more “old fashioned,” approach to laying a loved one to rest can feel more personal and meaningful.

If you’ve considered a green burial for yourself or someone you love, we hope this book serves as a valuable resource. We’ll explain what a green burial is and offer guidance to help you understand your burial choices.



Photo Credit: Willow Casket from Passages International
www.passagesinternational.com

GREEN BURIAL: WHAT IT IS

A green burial is a simple and natural alternative to the conventional burials most of us are familiar with. It causes minimal environmental impact by conserving natural resources, reducing carbon emissions, protecting worker health, and preserving natural habitat. This definition comes from the [Green Burial Council](#), an independent, nonprofit organization that works to bring awareness to natural burial options and sets the standards for what the organization calls “environmentally sustainable death care.”

In a green burial, specific steps are taken to meet that criteria. In its simplest and purest form, a green burial doesn’t use concrete vaults, traditional coffins with metalwork, or embalming chemicals. Instead, the body is wrapped in biodegradable shrouds or placed in a pine coffin and laid to rest where it can decompose and eventually become part of the earth.

The idea of a green burial may sound like another trend of the eco-conscious, but it’s actually the way people have cared for their deceased for thousands of years. In fact, the practice of embalming is relatively modern and did not begin until the American Civil War, when the families of soldiers killed far from home requested that the bodies be preserved and returned to them intact. It has been part of traditional burials ever since.

More Americans are interested in learning about green burial and considering it as their choice. In a 2015 [Harris poll](#) on behalf of the Funeral and Memorial Information Council, 64% of adults 40 years or older said they would be interested in green funeral options, compared with 43% percent in 2010. The number of cemeteries that either allow or are devoted to green burials is increasing as well, and we expect it to rise with growing awareness and demand for services.



CHOOSING A GREEN BURIAL

If you feel having a green burial is the right decision for you or a loved one, the process for planning one is similar to planning a traditional burial, with some adjustments.

The green funeral home

First, choose a funeral home to help you carry out your wishes. Because embalming is not allowed prior to green burial, you'll need to look for a funeral home willing to make accommodations in preparing the body. Phaneuf Funeral Homes and Crematorium, is the only funeral provider in New Hampshire approved by the Green Burial Council to offer a **green burial package**. Ker Phaneuf Funeral Home and Crematorium in Vermont was also the first in that state to be certified by the Green Burial Council and has become a leader in the Green Burial movement.

The alternative to embalming is refrigeration for the easiest, most economical method of body preservation. When a body is refrigerated, it is kept at a temperature which sufficiently delays decomposition for up to a few days.



The green cemetery

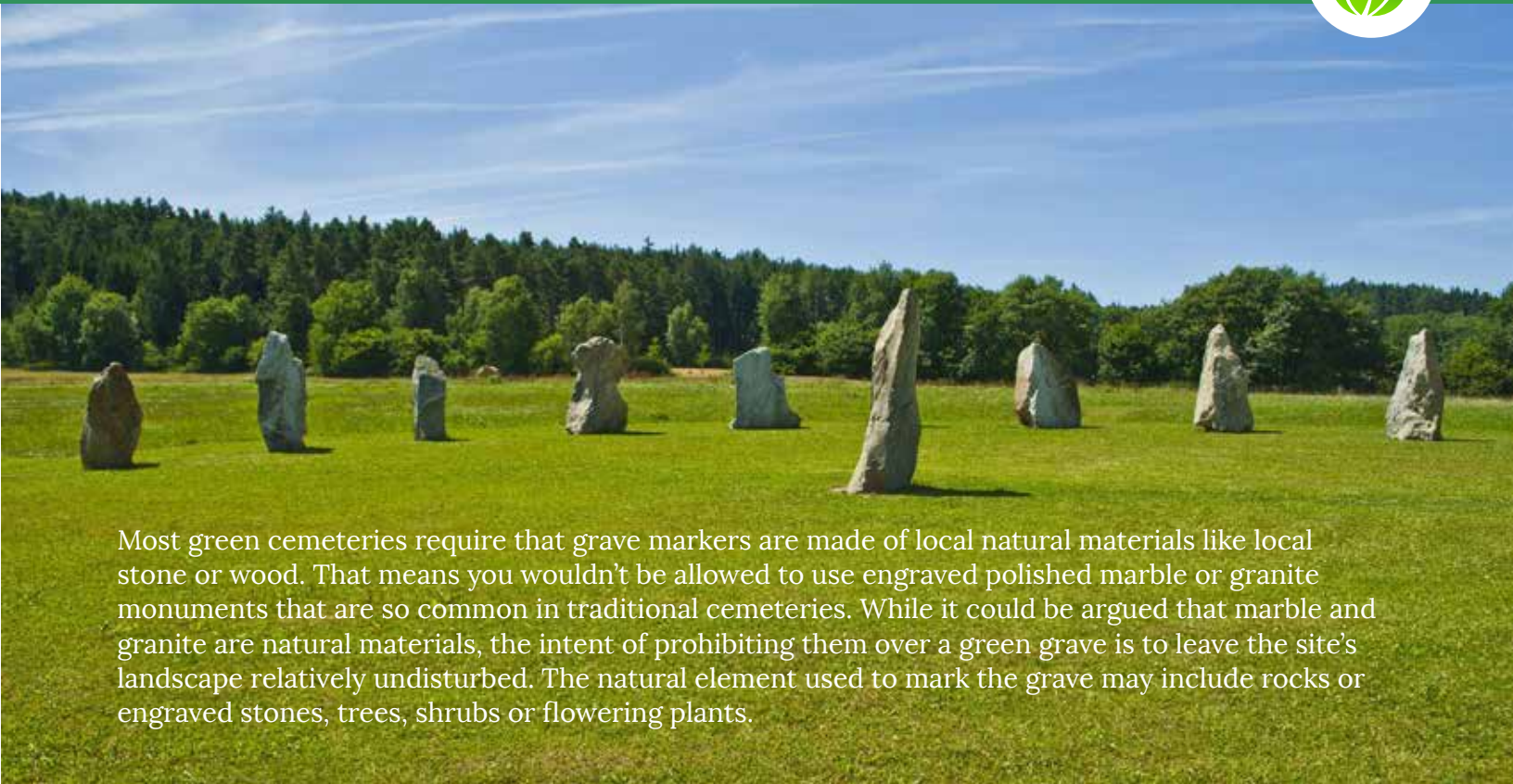
A funeral home versed in green practices can help you identify an appropriate location for your green burial. The Green Burial Council identifies **three types of cemeteries** based on the principles of green and natural burials:

A **hybrid** is a traditional cemetery that offers a green burial section, where a vault or conventional casket is not required, and instead allows for environmentally friendly burial containers or shrouds. Hybrids may also allow toxic-free embalming.

A **natural burial ground** expands the concept of green burial outside traditional

cemeteries and into natural settings, such as woodlands or a meadow. Natural burial grounds explicitly prohibit the use of vaults, concrete, metal, or any burial containers not made from natural/plant-derived materials. Embalming is also banned. As for maintaining the land itself, a truly green burial site uses no artificial pesticides.

A **conservation burial ground** meets all the requirements of being a natural cemetery and also is a nature preserve. A specific portion of the land is used for burials, while the rest is designated for conservation. Funds received from green burials goes to preserve the land.



Most green cemeteries require that grave markers are made of local natural materials like local stone or wood. That means you wouldn't be allowed to use engraved polished marble or granite monuments that are so common in traditional cemeteries. While it could be argued that marble and granite are natural materials, the intent of prohibiting them over a green grave is to leave the site's landscape relatively undisturbed. The natural element used to mark the grave may include rocks or engraved stones, trees, shrubs or flowering plants.

The following cemeteries offer green burial services in New Hampshire*:

Chocorua Cemetery

Hybrid Municipal Cemetery
(Vaultless burial)
12 Deer Hill Road
Tamworth, NH 03886
John Wheeler
603-323-8617

Laurel Hill Cemetery

Municipal Hybrid Cemetery
Wilton NH 03086
603-654-6602

Monadnock Quaker Meeting Friends

Natural Burial Ground
3 Davidson Road
Jaffrey NH 03452
603-532-6203

Tamworth Town Cemetery

Hybrid Municipal Cemetery
Hollow Hill
Tamworth, NH 03886
John Wheeler
603-323-8617

Richmond Cemetery

Hybrid Municipal
70 Athol Road
Richmond NH
603-903-2184
Mark Beal, cemetery sexton
roadagent.beal@gmail.com

In New Hampshire, you may bury the deceased on your own or others' private land. If you do that, be sure to follow the regulations set by the local town or city. You will likely be required to draw a map of the property showing the burial ground and file it with the property deed so the location will be clear to future owners.

*Source: *New Hampshire Funeral Resources, Education and Advocacy*



The concept of green burial in Vermont is gaining more ground, so to speak, thanks in part to a law passed in 2017 that relaxed the regulations on how deep a grave must be. Digging graves shallower than the previously required five feet allows for the natural decomposition essential for a burial to be considered green. While natural burials on private property were already legal in the Green Mountain State, more cemeteries are considering offering the option.

The following cemetery offers green burial services in Vermont:

Meeting House Hill Cemetery

580 Orchard St, Brattleboro, VT 05301
(802) 257-0712

The green committal service

One of the reasons a family might choose a green burial is because it can provide a more loving and personal experience for saying goodbye to those who have passed away. Some green cemeteries allow mourners to participate in nearly every aspect of the burial process, from digging the grave and transporting the body, to lowering the body into the ground, and filling the grave. For many people, participating in the green burial ritual gives them peace and closure in a way a conventional – and, for some, perhaps more sterile – service doesn't.

In [The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide](#), author Ann Hoffner described her experience in providing her father with a green burial and realizing he was not alone in death, surrounded by nature: “Up ahead, I see trips to the grave not to weep...but to see new life growing, the forest changing with the seasons and absorbing this grave plot into the larger plan.”

Other elements of the committal service for a green burial don't have to be any different than a traditional service: a celebration of the life of the deceased, being gently returned to the ground with dignity and love. Personalize each component of the service to reflect the culture and spirit of your loved one. Plan prayers, music, readings, and anything else that honors the deceased.

Religious considerations

Green burials do not conflict with the beliefs of any major religions. Some faiths, such as Jewish and Muslim, even require that the deceased be buried naturally. Jewish burial practices prohibit embalming and often don't use burial vaults. Green burials also conform to most Christian traditions, as well.

Think of the biblical text from the Book of Genesis often cited during funeral services: “. . .till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” In light of this, many people who choose natural or green burials feel they are laying their loved ones to rest in the way they were meant to.





When the best location is a traditional cemetery

If you would rather work with a particular cemetery for your burial service that isn't specifically "green," either because an existing cemetery already is the resting place of family members or it's close to home, there are some ways to make the traditional process more eco-friendly.

- You can still choose not to have the body embalmed, or you may request the funeral home use a nontoxic embalming agent.
- Use the biodegradable burial container of your choice and avoid any casket that was built with toxic construction materials. If you'd rather not use a casket at all, ask for the body to be wrapped in a shroud.
- You can also request that the cemetery not use a concrete liner to house the casket. A concrete vault is typically used to level the surface area above the casket for convenient lawn maintenance. If the cemetery agrees to not use one, you can offer to compensate your cemetery for any labor necessary for gravesite maintenance associated with the lack of a vault. Alternatively, if the cemetery won't concede the use of a vault, ask for a concrete grave box with an open bottom, or have holes drilled in the bottom of the vault, or invert the vault without its cover, so the body can eventually return to the earth.
- If the impact on the environment is important to you and the deceased, choose the minimum size gravemarker allowed by the cemetery. Try to find a local monument builder who uses indigenous rather than imported stone. That will reduce the carbon footprint of production and transportation.

GREEN BURIAL PRODUCTS

As you've learned, green burials mandate the use of non-toxic and biodegradable materials. According to the Green Burial Council, "approved caskets, urns and shrouds must be constructed from plant-derived, recycled plant-derived, natural, animal, or unfired earthen materials, including shell, liner, and adornments."

With increased awareness and growing requests for green burials, it's no surprise there is a market to accommodate environmentally friendly demands.

Not only are commercially produced caskets made with toxic materials, but they can take a very long time to break down under the ground. Green caskets are sometimes called "**ecoffins**." They take much less time to break down in the soil. Among the acceptable materials ecoffins are made of:

- Bamboo
- Teak
- Banana leaf
- Hemp
- Willow
- Recycled cardboard
- Organic wool and felt
- Rattan
- Cork
- Seagrass



Cloths that wrap or wind around the body for burial, shrouds, are even simpler. You may use a favorite blanket or quilt as long as it is made of natural fibers, such as cotton, wool, silk, or hemp. If you don't have one already, a shroud can be purchased. The body must be securely wrapped from head to feet.

Have you heard of the infinity mushroom? Jae Rhim Lee and her organization, Coeio, (which means “come together”) have been testing several strains of mushrooms in order to find spores that best aid in decomposition and the dissolution of human toxins. The result of that work is the **Infinity Burial Suit** that is providing a clean alternative in line with green burials.



Even if you have no need for the Suit right away, you can purchase and store it for an unlimited amount of time. How does it work? The mushrooms and microbes present on the suit work quickly and efficiently to get rid of the 219 toxins present in the human body and decompose – the result is a reintegration back into the Earth and another step into a more sustainable future. Infinity Suits can be used in conjunction with biodegradable caskets or as a sole container.

GREEN CREMATION

You might assume that cremation by definition is the “greenest” and most environmentally friendly way to handle a body when one dies. Not so. Yes, it might be better for the environment than a full traditional funeral that involves embalming, a metal coffin, cement-lined vault, and a large headstone. But flame-based cremation uses a lot of fossil fuel.

Medical science is behind the gentler process that's become known as green cremation. It's the eco-friendly alternative to flame-based cremation, using water and potassium hydroxide to reduce the body to its basic element of bone ash. It was developed by the Mayo Clinic to dispose of bodies that were donated for research.





Among the environmental benefits of this flameless alternative:

- More than 75% reduction of carbon footprint
- Eliminates concerns over mercury emissions
- Uses 1/8 the amount of energy of flame-based cremation
- Pacemakers and some other medical devices do not need to be removed prior to the process as with flame-based cremation.

Another environmentally conscious cremation process funeral homes like ours have adopted involves placing an unembalmed body into a completely consumable container that is then put into the cremation chamber. There is no waste and none of the processes are harmful to the environment. In addition, we are the only funeral home in New England to purchase carbon offsets to offset 100% of the carbon footprint for each of our cremations.

Other ways that we have gone green include installing clean burning propane retorts in our cremation equipment. This minimizes the impact that the cremation chamber has on the environment when it is in operation.

As with traditional cremation, the remains are returned to the family for burial or scattering. If they are buried, the ashes are placed in a biodegradable container designed to break down within days or months. We offer many decorative options that meet green requirements. Some of the materials used in green urn construction include Himalayan rock salt, recycled paper, cornstarch, hand-thrown porcelain and wood.

Another option – skip the urn and return the ashes to the earth through scattering. Some cemeteries allow you to pour the remains into the ground, or you could consider doing it on your own property. You could also mix the natural ashes with mulch and plant a tree or make a garden.

There are technically no state laws that govern where you may or may not store or spread the ashes of your loved one in New Hampshire. Therefore, you have a variety of options when it comes to choosing where to spread the remains of a deceased loved one. For location guidelines and more practical advice, please see our [blog post](#) about where you can and can't scatter ashes in New Hampshire.



PLANNING AHEAD

We often advise that planning ahead for your funeral can provide much-needed guidance to family members and loved ones left behind to carry out a final goodbye. (Read more in a related [blog post here](#).) If a green burial is your preference, then written instructions may be even more important for making sure no detail is overlooked. Be as specific as possible with your choices to meet the requirements of a green burial – including location, your choice of burial container, whether your family should participate in preparing the graveside service, and gravemarker. We have a helpful planning workbook that you can [download here](#).



To further assist family in planning a green burial, look into options for pre-paying. (You may read an associated [blog post here](#).)

Cost of green burials

The simplistic nature of a green burial can also make it more cost effective than traditional burial. There are fees associated with funeral home services, but you will likely see a lower price tag with green options versus conventional packages. Green burials eliminate many additional expenses such as embalming, vaults, and headstone carving. Whether you save additional money on other elements of a green burial depends on your choices.

Prices vary according to the type of green burial site and the services provided. Remember that conservation burial grounds charge higher fees for ongoing preservation of the land.

Green burial caskets are likely much cheaper than traditional hardwood or metal manufactured caskets, so that may be a significant source of cost savings.

If you use a cemetery for a green burial, you still have to pay for the plot, but other costs may not be necessary. Green graves are generally shallower than the traditional vault-lined graves, and are often hand dug. Concrete grave vaults or liners are not permitted, neither are marble or stone memorials.





COMMON QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ABOUT GREEN BURIALS

Is a green burial legal?

Green or natural burials are legal in all 50 states, though rules and regulations may vary. To help guide you through the process, ask your funeral director for the options and what you need to know about your area and chosen location.

Isn't embalming required by law?

Embalming is the societal custom of cleansing and disinfecting bodies after death, but the process does not preserve a body indefinitely. It is not a legal requirement for burial.

Can families have a viewing if the body is not embalmed?

Embalming is only required when there is an open casket viewing, where the public is invited. Embalming is not required if the family has selected to have a private family viewing. If you have additional questions regarding embalming and viewings, check with your funeral director for details.

Will animals disturb the gravesite?

The bodies in a green burial site are at a depth deep enough to avoid attracting animals. Whether or not the body has been embalmed also has no impact on animals that might come upon the gravesite.

Will a natural burial cemetery hurt water quality?

Soil is an effective natural filter, preventing any products of decomposition from leaking into the water table. Keep in mind too, that green burials contain no toxic materials, such as formaldehyde.

CONCLUSION

As industry standards evolve, you can count on Phaneuf Funeral Homes and Crematorium to remain a trusted partner to help families plan and carry out the funeral and burial services that meet their needs. We hope this comprehensive look at one option for green burial provided the insight necessary to help you make decisions and consider choices. As with any topic on the issues of funerals and coping with loss, we welcome you to connect with us to ask questions.

RESOURCES

[Green Burial Council](#)

The only organization that offers after-death green or natural verification is the Green Burial Council. The Green Burial accreditation seal, signifies the product, service, or cemetery has been certified green.

[The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide](#), by Ann Hoffner

[A Greener Funeral](#)

[New Hampshire Funeral Resources, Education and Advocacy](#)

[Green Burial Vermont](#)



Phaneuf Funeral Homes & Crematorium
243 Hanover Street, Manchester, NH 03104
Ph. 603-625-5777 • Fax (603) 218-6026



Phaneuf Funeral Homes & Crematorium
250 Coolidge Avenue, Manchester, NH 03102
Ph. 603-625-5777 • Fax (603) 218-6026



Phaneuf Funeral Homes & Crematorium
172 King Street, Boscawen, NH 03303
Ph. 603-625-5777 • Fax (603) 218-6026



Pillsbury Phaneuf Funeral Home & Crematorium
101 Union Street, Littleton, NH 03651
Ph. 603-444-3311 • Fax (603) 218-6026



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Ker Phaneuf Funeral Homes & Crematorium
57 High St, Brattleboro, VT 05301
Ph. 802-254-5655

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Ker Phaneuf
Funeral Homes & Crematorium
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www.phaneuf.net info@phaneuf.net