



# Many Shades of Green:

## A GUIDE TO ECO-FRIENDLY FUNERAL & BURIAL PRACTICES

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.

-Albert Einstein

### WHAT IS GREEN BURIAL?

Over five decades after the first Earth Day raised awareness of how human activity impacts our environment, the demand for green practices continues to grow in our daily lives – and even in death. Green burial is the name given to the movement away from traditional funerals and burials and toward death care with minimal environmental impact. Green burial aids in conserving natural resources, can be more affordable and practical than conventional methods of disposition, and often fosters more personal and meaningful celebrations of life.

This natural approach is not new. It harkens back to simpler end-of-life rituals. Generally, with green burial the body is not embalmed but prepared and dressed in a biodegradable shroud and lowered into a grave or buried in a compostable casket, usually in a location dedicated to the beauty of natural surroundings. The goal is to be as environmentally responsible as possible.

In marked contrast to funeral practices that became more elaborate during the Victorian era, the popularity of green burial among all age groups is growing as people turn their focus to the impact of modern burial practices on the environment. Increasing numbers of people are eschewing the embalming practices popularized during the Civil War, when soldiers' remains were shipped long distances for burial. Many are avoiding extravagant caskets and concrete vaults commonly used to reduce grave subsidence and lower landscape maintenance costs. There is growing realization that these modernized practices are extremely resource-intensive, consuming millions of board feet of



Valley View Green at Laurel Hill East.

lumber, thousands of pounds of steel, copper and bronze, tons of concrete, and millions of gallons of embalming fluids each year.

### WHY CHOOSE GREEN?

Green burial is both safe and legal. Proponents of green burial say that there are social, economic and environmental benefits. Those who choose this method of burial often do so to leave a legacy that both protects the environment and allows those who mourn an opportunity for quiet reflection in natural surroundings. It aligns with those desiring a more personalized and meaningful approach to death care, often reflecting a philosophy of a life lived in support of the environment.

There are tangible considerations as well.

Green burials help increase biodiversity and capture carbon. According to the Green Burial Council, a non-profit that advocates for environmentally sustainable death care, a traditional burial produces 250 lbs. of carbon while green burial sequesters 25 lbs.

While the cost of burial sites varies, there are financial savings when the cost of a casket, embalming and burial vault are eliminated.

Embracing green burial practices minimizes toxic effects on the environment and provides protection for funeral workers from harmful chemicals including carcinogenic



Nature's Sanctuary at Laurel Hill West.

formaldehyde that has been shown to cause higher rates of certain cancers and ALS.

Many proponents of green burial use pre-planning services so that at time of need, their choices in death care mirror their life values of conservation and respect for the planet.

#### TYPES OF GREEN BURIAL GROUNDS

According to the Green Burial Council, there are three categories of green cemeteries within the United States and Canada that offer this approach. All forego embalming, vaults, and the use of herbicides and pesticides. They all encourage sustainable management practices, aiming to restore or preserve habitat while caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact.

› Conservation burial grounds are those managed by certified land trust organizations or land otherwise deed-restricted to guarantee its long-term stewardship with sustainable maintenance practices.

› Natural burial grounds prohibit the use of vaults, concrete liners, toxic chemicals and burial containers not made from natural or plant derived products. Natural appearance must be maintained with the use of native vegetation.

› Hybrid cemeteries are conventional cemeteries that also offer the same green burial options that a natural cemetery does.

Laurel Hill is a hybrid cemetery. Yet true to its mission of being progressive and innovative, it is also regarded as a Restoration Ecology Cemetery. This new classification belongs to cemeteries that repurpose previously used parcels of land as green burial areas. Laurel Hill now has three green burial areas, including Nature's Sanctuary, certified as SITES Gold in 2018 by the Green Business Certification Inc. (GBCI.) This endorsement recognizes Laurel Hill's comprehensive program for designing, developing, and maintaining sustainable landscapes with a commitment to ecological, burial, and aesthetic promises.

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Interest in Green Funeral Options: According to National Funeral Directors Association's (NFDA) 2022 Consumer Awareness and Preferences Report, 60.5% would be interested in exploring "green" funeral options because of their potential environmental benefits, cost savings or for some other reason, up from 55.7% in 2021 with member cemeteries reporting increased demand.

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#### ECO-FRIENDLY BODY AND SITE PREPARATION

Sustainable green practices are also being adopted by funeral directors, while new green certifications have emerged from the NFDA with ethical funeral and business standards for funeral directors to follow. These include the short-term preservation of a body in lieu of embalming using dry ice, Techni-ice, refrigeration units or fans, or newer nontoxic embalming agents; dressing the body in natural fabrics with no metal zippers, fasteners or jewelry; removing medical implants; wrapping the body in a linen or cotton shroud; and placing the body in a bio-degradable casket of willow or on a custom crafted wood carrier. For those choosing a form of cremation who also want a green burial (see below), green urns made from wood, rock salt, gourds, or even cornstarch are available, in addition to plant pods that can hold cremated remains with soil and nutrient additions to support new plants or trees.

Graves at many green burial sites are hand-dug or prepared with the use of electric support vehicles and machinery that does not depend on fossil fuel. Relatives and friends of the deceased may assist in digging the grave, accompanying the procession to the site and lowering the remains as a final, personalized tribute to their loved one. Memorialization typically includes naturally formed markers such as boulders, or inscriptions on low monument walls, benches or pathways in the surrounding areas.



## A WORD ABOUT CREMATION

Cremation, while rising in popularity, is not as eco-friendly as natural burial due to the high carbon dioxide emission of the process. However, it still offers a considerably lighter footprint than traditional casket and vault burial. While cremated remains no longer contain organic compounds, they can have their PH levels amended to provide balanced nutrients for plant life. Additionally, aquamation, or alkaline hydrolysis, is emerging as an alternative to standard cremation. This process does not use fossil fuels and reduces energy consumption by about 90%. It closely resembles the environmental impact of natural decomposition and is currently legal for humans in more than half the states, with legislation pending in others, including Pennsylvania. Laurel Hill has employed aquamation in its disposition of pets since 2018.

## LONG TERM SUSTAINABILITY

A cemetery's commitment to green burial and funeral practices is long term and should reflect a comprehensive culture of sustainability. Green values should extend to land conservation, energy usage, recycling, waste and water management, employee health and well-being, and a reduction in resource-intensive maintenance services. An integrated approach to green services requires strategic thinking, innovative design, and effective stewardship which encourages engagement from volunteers and family members – a fitting way to remember and commemorate those we have loved and lost.

## GREEN BURIAL AT LAUREL HILL CEMETERIES

Laurel Hill is a premier Philadelphia institution that combines a funeral home, crematory, two historic cemeteries and a nationally certified arboretum into a unified place of beauty where all can remember and reflect. With a longstanding culture of sustainability, our cemeteries and funeral home specialize in green services and have a variety of eco-friendly products to choose from.

Nature's Sanctuary is our award-winning green burial area at Laurel Hill West. Establishing a powerful connection between people, nature and community, Nature's Sanctuary is planted with indigenous grasses, trees, and shrubs and is currently maintained as a meadow transitioning into a successional forest.

Valley View Green, the first green burial area at Laurel Hill East, is a peaceful quarter-acre of tall native grasses and shrubs framing sweeping views of the cemetery's historic monuments and expansive landscape.

Bala Green is our newest green burial section at Laurel Hill West with views to Manayunk, planted with trees, shrubs, and an abundance of perennials.

No matter which end-of-life choices you embrace, our compassionate staff are here to serve families with the highest of standards, and are prepared to accommodate our communities' diverse cultural, religious, and traditional needs.

