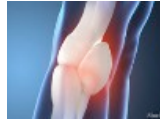




[\\$500K life insurance, no exam necessary](#)



[Shocking discovery for joint relief](#)



[Legally cut your credit card balances by up to 50%](#)

Not Logged In [Login](#) / [Sign-up](#)

★chron | Houston & Texas News

NEWS SPORTS BUSINESS ENTERTAINMENT LIFE TRAVEL BLOGS JOBS HOMES CARS CLASSIFIEDS

NOW 90°

[Facebook](#) [Twitter](#)

91 Comments 11 Recommend 35

Search [advanced search](#) | [archives](#)

Chron.com Web Search by **YAHOO!**

A natural return to the earth

'Green burials' eliminate toxins and nonbiodegradable material from end-of-life rituals — and the movement is gaining ground

By SHAMINDER DULAI
HOUSTON CHRONICLE
June 14, 2010, 10:05AM



Shaminder Dulai Chronicle

Developer Terry Ward plans to turn 30 acres near Chappell Hill into the greater Houston area's first certified green burial ground.

When J.P. Patterson grasped a strap and helped lower the untreated pine casket holding his wife's linen-wrapped body into the ground on a clear January day in Georgetown, he felt it was a fitting send-off for a woman of strong faith and simple tastes.

Rita Patterson took joy in the pleasures of participating in Bible study groups and cooking for her family. She never made a fuss about herself.

So when the mother of six died in her sleep after a long bout with colon cancer, her husband knew she'd have no use for a tombstone towering over a pricey casket entombed in a cement vault.

"Even before we knew what it was called, she wanted a simple service," Patterson said.

It's called a "green burial," and it's part of a growing movement to eliminate toxic chemicals or nonbiodegradable materials from end-of-life rituals by forgoing embalming, vaults, tombstones and metal caskets.

Green services cost an average of \$4,900, about one-third the price of more traditional options.

Our Lady of the Rosary Cemetery near Austin is Texas' only cemetery to be recognized so far by the emerging industry's leading organization.

As the environmentally friendly burial movement grows, others, including a Houston land developer who recently bought a picturesque piece of land outside Brenham, are aiming to capitalize on the demand.

The movement's popularity has increased in the past decade as aging baby boomers — who grew up challenging social norms and examining their relationships to religion, family and the environment — consider their mortality, according to the nonprofit Green Burial Council.

"This concept resonates with Texans more than any other state," the council's founder, Joe Sehee, said. Those favoring the green option here often are not doing it as a final act of environmental activism, he said, but out of a desire to be close to the land, to return to biblical practices or as an alternative to embalming

Share

- Del.icio.us
- Twitter
- Facebook
- Email
- Digg
- Yahoo! Buzz
- StumbleUpon

35 people recommend this.

without choosing cremation.

Industry on the fence

No statistics are kept on the number of green burials, but their popularity has increased from not being a mainstream option in the 1990s to 21 percent of Americans older than 50 stating they would prefer an eco-friendly end-of-life ritual, according to a 2007 AARP survey.

Gilda Hart is among the supporters. She was turned off from more traditional options when she saw the embalming process up close and when she experienced her mother's funeral.

When she learned about green burials last year, she gobbled up every morsel of information.

The 58-year-old Houston resident likes the religious concept of "dust to dust" and the environmental benefits of not burying nonbiodegradable metals, treated wood and concrete.

"I'm not saying I'm an environmentalist, I can't say that, but whatever we give back is greater than what we receive," Hart said.

HOUSTON CHRONICLE
Only \$2 a week



Log onto [EarthShare.org](#) and see what you can do.
One environment. One simple way to care for it.®

- [A&M's board of regents expected to choose SEC](#)
- [Neighbors mourn boy killed in S. Africa fall](#)
- [Houston lawyer denies role in socialite death plot](#)
- [Deputies seek driver in hit-and-run death on Veterans Memorial](#)
- [Woman found dead in northeast Houston home](#)

- [A&M's board of regents expected to choose SEC\(197\)](#)
- [Reports: Vince Young suspect in strip club assault\(131\)](#)
- [Perry wants drones as eye over border. Others not so sure\(81\)](#)
- [Husband denies role in socialite death plot\(78\)](#)
- ['Green burials' gaining ground\(77\)](#)

- [Memorial neighbors mourn boy killed in South Africa](#)
- [Ambitious Dome plan could cost \\$1 billion](#)
- [Texas challenges EPA over air quality program](#)
- [North Forest officer accused of abuse in traffic incident](#)
- [Conrad Murray, Jackson's doc, keeps Calif. medical license](#)
- [State halts placements at youth facility that held 'fight club'](#)
- [Teen charged in fatal stabbing of 16-year-old](#)

Others, including the National Funeral Directors Association, are still on the fence about green burials. Though the organization doesn't discourage the practice, it cautions families not to get caught up in the hype.

"Because green funerals are an emerging alternative to traditional funeral practices, some questions have not yet been answered, such as whether there are any long-term effects on the environment," the organization writes to its members in a pamphlet.

Group calls for oversight

It is a family's prerogative to lower their own casket or forgo a vault and embalming, but James Olson, a funeral-home owner in Sheboygan, Wis., and spokesman for the organization, encourages families to plan ahead and ask questions. Vaults prevent ground sinking and graves collapsing, and embalming can make for more comfortable viewing and limit the spread of contagions if a loved one died of disease, he said.

More green burial grounds across the country are popping up every week, bringing increased risks of unscrupulous providers stalling the movement, Sehee said.

Out of that fear, his organization has crafted a set of certification standards and a tiered-rating system that requires cemetery operators to commit to a certain degree of transparency, accountability and third-party oversight. They hope a governmental agency will become interested enough to take over eventually.

"We need to be able to distinguish the shades of green," Sehee said. "To let people know exactly what they are getting is what they think they are getting."

Last year he certified Our Lady of the Rosary Cemetery, where Rita Patterson was buried, as the first in Texas after examining its grounds and procedures.

Two other burial grounds can be found in the state, one in Huntsville and another in Houston, but the nonprofit has not certified either because they don't meet all the standards or haven't made a request to be examined, respectively.

Cycle-of-life viewpoint

In the next couple of weeks Sehee will visit with Houston land developer Terry Ward to examine his plans to break ground on a green burial cemetery in the rolling terrain near Chappell Hill.

Ward arrived at the same conclusion as Hart after thinking about his own burial wishes. After not finding a suitable place he decided to take things into his own hands, calling on his stable of private investors to establish a place. He's filed the necessary paperwork and submitted a \$75,000 bond to the state for a required perpetual license for cemeteries.

"There's nothing keeping me from doing it," Ward said. "It's something I'm passionate about; I want to spend the rest of my life with green burials."

As he squinted under the Texas sun across a grove of blueberry plants bordered by coves of trees and a lake, he smiled that one day entire families will be buried on the hilly 30-acre plot. He plans to carve out 30 percent to 40 percent of the land as nonburial areas for joggers and bikers as a park. He envisions his cemetery as a place families will want to visit because it won't carry the air of morbidity or fears associated with conventional cemeteries.

"People look at cemeteries as death, grief, darkness. All negative words. Yes, we need to mourn and grieve, but why isn't there a celebration part to this?" Ward said. "I want to create a different experience (and) make it a better experience for people."

The better experience made the difference for the Pattersons.

"That's what the green burials are all about," J.P. Patterson said. "It brings the family together, to think of them and what they meant to you."

He feels their children connected with their mother's death and took her loss better by being involved. There was nothing morbid or disrespectful about the process, just a return to the earth, he said.

"Green burials are about acknowledging the truth," Sehee said. "We live and we die, and that's OK. It's the natural process."

jdrouhy@hearstcd.com

Comments

Readers are solely responsible for the content of the comments they post here. Comments are subject to the site's [terms and conditions](#) of use and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or approval of the Houston Chronicle. Readers whose comments violate the terms of use may have their comments removed or all of their content blocked from viewing by other users without notification.

You must be logged in to comment. [Login](#) | [Sign up](#)

Comment