



If there are no Green Burial Council providers in your area, we suggest using the following four-part green burial guide. This guide will 1) equip you to make eco-friendly end-of-life options, and 2) help you identify false or misleading marketing claims regarding the environmental benefits of products and services.

### **Four-Part Green Burial Guide: What you can do and what to look out for**

#### **1. Embalming**

Embalming is used to temporarily inhibit the decomposition process and involves the use of formaldehyde, a toxic chemical that has been shown to cause higher rates of certain types of cancer in workers who perform embalming (Beane, Blair, and Lubin 2009).

##### **What you can do:**

Forego embalming. Special refrigeration units are effective at inhibiting the decomposition process. If your funeral home lacks a refrigeration unit:

- Ask that they use dry ice to inhibit the decomposition process
- Ask that they use a nontoxic embalming agent (many of which can be applied topically).

##### **What to look out for:**

Claims that an embalming agent is “green” or “eco-friendly” because it is formaldehyde-free when in fact its effectiveness is attributed to other toxic chemicals

#### **2. Concrete Vaults**

Concrete vaults house caskets in the ground. Some vaults even look like caskets, only bigger, while others look like cement boxes. Once its lid is in place, a concrete vault helps maintain a level soil surface by preventing soil settlement resulting in the manicured appearance observed in conventional cemeteries.

The production of concrete and its ingredients requires energy resulting in the generation of carbon dioxide. Vaults also create a barrier between the casket and the earth, prohibiting the natural decomposition process.

##### **What you can do:**

Forego a concrete vault. If the cemetery is concerned about being able to maintain a level soil surface:

- Ask if a shroud is acceptable or a casket containing a lid that will collapse – both of these options will keep the grave from collapsing over time.



- Offer (if you wish) an additional contribution to the cemetery's endowment care fund to compensate the cemetery for possible maintenance required to level off the gravesite.

### **What to look out for:**

Claims that concrete is natural and therefore vaults are “green.” While concrete comes from natural sources, the mining, manufacturing and transporting of cement and concrete results in environmental harm because of associated carbon emissions.

Eliminating the barrier between the casket and the earth by inverting the vault. Inversion of a vault (putting the casket in the ground first and then placing the vault over the casket face down) is not an eco-friendly alternative because the environmental impact due to the manufacturing and transportation of the vault is not eliminated.

### **3. Caskets and shrouds**

Too often, caskets are made using toxic chemicals that may be harmful to workers. In addition, some caskets are made with materials that require large amounts of energy either because of their content such as metal, or because they have been shipped long distances. Other caskets, even though constructed from “natural” materials, may cause environmental harm because such materials have not been harvested in a sustainable manner, such as timber that comes from clear-cut forests.

### **What you can do:**

If choosing a casket labeled as sustainable, natural, green, etc., consider asking the following:

- Is the casket made from sustainably harvested wood?
- Is the liner of the casket made of organic material?
- Is the product or its components transported over long distances to reach the consumer (>3000 miles)?
- What is known about the finishes and adhesives that are used? Do they contain plastics, acrylics, or similar synthetic polymeric materials?
- Ask if the product has been reviewed by an independent, third party trust provider.
- Consider using a shroud instead of a casket. A shroud can be made from simple cloth obtained from a local fabric store. Growing numbers of shrouds are now being manufactured with handles and stability boards that make them easier to carry and to lower into a grave.

### **What to look out for:**

Keep in mind that terms like “natural,” “sustainable,” and “green” could be meaningless if not readily understood and verifiable by a consumer or certified by an independent, third party trust provider.



Claims of “biodegradability,” while important in helping reduce waste in landfills, mean very little in this context; especially since almost any material will eventually break down in the earth.

#### **4. Maintaining and Protecting Natural Habitat**

One of the most compelling reasons to choose green burial is the promise that it preserves or restores natural habitat.

##### **What you can do:**

Choose a green cemetery with legal protections that prevents the land from becoming (or returning to) a conventional cemetery and that has established a fund for long-term maintenance.

- Ask if the cemetery has a *restrictive covenant* or a *conservation easement* on the property.
- Ask if the cemetery puts at least 5% of the sales from burial plots into an endowment fund. Also ask who has oversight of the fund.

##### **What to look out for:**

Cemeteries that make long-term promises without an endowment fund or that lack the oversight to ensure the security and proper use of the fund.

Rules and regulations that promise protection can easily be amended. Be wary of cemeteries that claim permanent protection based solely on their rules and regulations.

##### **Summary:**

If you find that providers are unable or unwilling to accommodate your requests, we encourage you to shop around for one that will. If you have questions about the cemetery, funeral home, or products you’re considering, contact the Green Burial Council at 888-966-3330 or email [info@greenburialcouncil.org](mailto:info@greenburialcouncil.org).

##### **Reference List:**

Beane Freeman L, Blair A, Lubin JH, et al. Mortality from lymphohematopoietic malignancies among workers in formaldehyde industries: the National Cancer Institute cohort. *J Natl Cancer Inst.* 2009; 101:751–7