



Hybrid Cemetery FAQs

Q. Is there a universal definition of green burials?

A. The Green Burial Council provides nuanced definitions of green burial in its *Glossary of Green Burial Terms*. These terms have been devised and evaluated by leaders in the field at all levels. In terms of certification, each level—hybrid, natural, and conservation—must meet specific standards to qualify.

Q. How does a shrouded body get carried to the grave?

A. Many cemeteries have a vehicle for moving shrouded and casketed bodies, including retrofitted golf carts, wagons, trailers, or other wheeled conveyances. Some families choose to conduct a processional with pall bearers, either on shoulder for a casket or with carrying handles on a shrouding board for shroud burials. (See more detail in *Opening, Closing and Maintenance of a Green Burial Grave*)

Q. How and who lowers the body?

A. This depends on how the individual cemetery chooses to handle family participation and what mechanical devices are available. Some cemeteries continue to use excavators for digging and hydraulic machinery for lowering, while others pay employees to hand dig graves and allow the family, with direction if necessary, to lower the body themselves using shrouding boards, straps, or ropes. Sometimes family members wish to dig the grave themselves. Green burial operators should expect more family participation and be prepared with appropriate equipment—and liability waiver agreements built into their contract for services. (See *Opening*)

Q. What protects the cemetery from liability claims for injuries incurred during carrying, digging, lowering, and closing the grave?

A. It is wise to require the next-of-kin to sign a liability waiver that indemnifies the cemetery and all of its employees from responsibility for injuries of anyone in their party during the funeral. This can be simple language included in the contract or a stand-alone agreement that is witnessed if possible. It is good practice to provide written instructions and warnings in a guidebook designed to educate the family about cemetery rules and best practices when purchasing the plot and/or arranging the burial. (See *Sample Guidebook for Hybrid Cemetery Operators*)

Q. How deep does one place the body?

A. Burial depth differs by state. For a comprehensive list by state of this and other requirements, go to <http://www.nhfuneral.org/legal-requirements-by-state.html>. As a general rule, the ideal burial depth for optimal decomposition conditions is 3.5 – 4 feet from the bottom of the grave to the soil horizon, which also guarantees an 18-24 inch smell barrier that prevents animals, two and four legged both, from being

able to smell anything. By adding the displaced soil to the top of the grave in a mound, that depth is doubled until it gradually settles.

Q. What if the body is in bad condition?

A. Included in the contract and/or guidebook should be explicit guidelines for the condition of the body when presented for burial, with the clear understanding that they will be turned away if those conditions are not met. Many families hire funeral directors for body preparation so it would be the professional's job to repair any damage or rectify any issues. If the family is in charge, bodies will most likely be coming for burial in a short enough period of time that these scenarios are unlikely, but if there were a problem, it would be their responsibility to address it by whatever means necessary. (See *Sample Guidebook*)

Q. Won't wild animals dig up corpses?

A. No. Burials occur 3.5 feet under the ground with, at minimum, an 18-inch smell barrier. Animals are much more interested in living prey above ground than in working that hard. We're just not that delicious.

Q. Won't we be able to smell them?

A. No. Same principles apply. And remember this from 5th grade science? Humans have a dismal sense of smell compared to animals. If they can't smell bodies, we surely won't be able to either. Wild boar are the most deep-digging of all wildlife and they typically max out at 12 inches.

Q. Do green burials contaminate the water table or drinking water?

A. No. With burials at 3.5 feet deep, there is no danger of contaminating potable water that is found about 75 feet below the surface. Mandatory setbacks from known water sources also ensure that surface water is not at risk.

Q. Do unembalmed bodies pollute the ground with chemo or other drugs?

A. Soil is the best natural filter there is, binding organic compounds and making them unable to travel. Microorganisms in the soil break down any chemical compounds that remain in the body. We lose more toxic chemicals during a day of living than a whole body will decomposing.

Q. How long does it take for a body to completely decompose?

A. Depending on soil type, oxygen availability, and moisture present, it takes on average 6 weeks to lose the majority of soft tissue through moisture absorption by the soil, and up to 2 years for complete decomposition. It may take up to twenty years for bones to absorb in moist soils.

Q. What soil conditions are the most favorable for green burial?

A. Well drained soils with some clay content to absorb organic compounds, and an active biological presence of bacteria are ideal for promoting efficient decomposition. This allows for aerobic decay, followed by anaerobic decay, resulting in rich soils high in nitrogen content and organic compounds.

Q. Can bodies be buried in winter?

A. Depending on frost level and previous preparation of the gravesite, burial in winter is feasible. Various methods are available for snow removal and thawing ground in cold climates, including coal fires, use of heaters, and thermal blankets. Often digging graves ahead of time and filling them with straw, compost, or other organic material and then capping it for easy removal at need works well. (See *Opening*)

Q. What is done in the winter time if the cemetery is closed?

A. Burials in cemeteries that choose not to bury in winter have systems and facilities that house bodies until spring burial. Embalmed bodies will have a slight delay of a couple of weeks before the formaldehyde dissipates, slowing decomposition, but the real retardant is temperature. All bodies respond well to being kept cool for the time needed, whether in a mausoleum, below grade facility, or other means of consistent cool temperatures. (See *Opening*)

Q. How does one mark the actual burial spot?

A. Ideally, graves are marked by GPS, but these systems can be costly. Corner markers made of stone are acceptable, as are flat markers at the head. Metal spikes could be buried near the surface to allow a metal detector to locate the perimeter of the grave, a more cost-effective and durable method, depending on the metal used. Some other type of physical marker is possible as well, such as native plants, trees or shrubs, or a plain or engraved fieldstone.

Q. What about memorialization?

A. Green burial sections do not allow upright monuments. Instead, a flat marker, usually made of native stone, is at the head. Using concrete to set stones is frowned upon in a green section, as concrete has its own significant environmental downsides. Flat markers make finding the grave and mowing the area relatively easy. Maintenance consists of removing overgrowth, if wished. Some cemeteries choose to have no physical markers yet include the person's name and dates on a central cenotaph at the entrance. Some cemeteries allow installation art pieces situated throughout the cemetery.

Q. How are vaultless burials disinterred?

A. Families are asked to sign a contract stating that they understand that their family member will not be disinterred unless legally ordered to do so by the State, and that the family will be responsible for any costs not born by the State should this be ordered. Good records and physical indicators of the perimeter are critical, though the shorter burial depth and proper preparation of the grave with evergreen boughs, compost, or other organic material may provide a soil roadmap.

Q. What about grave robbing?

A. Grave robbing as a way to make extra cash by providing cadavers for medical study ended by the early 1900's. Body donations now provide plenty for a variety of scientific research. Given the superstitions ingrained in us, plus the significant repercussions for violating anti-desecration laws, grave robbing has not been reported in decades in any cemetery, no less a green burial one. Additionally, if the grave is 3.5 - 4 feet deep and the displaced soil is mounded above by 3-4 feet, it's highly unlikely that anyone is going

to bother and mess. By the time the body has decomposed and it's down to bones, the grave may be pretty well blended into the environment. If concerned, consider locating the green burial area nearer a central location instead of the periphery.

Q. Most cemeteries are mowed – are these areas not mowed?

A. It is entirely up to the cemetery officials to determine the appropriate or desirable methods of maintaining the green burial section. Some choose to make the area consistent with the conventional area by mowing, some choose various other ways of balancing access and sustainable management with aesthetics.

Q. What will be expected of the cemetery employees at the time of burial?

A. Green burial services, though often more family participatory, do not differ greatly from conventional services. Funeral directors and clergy are often involved, directing and guiding the event as usual. If a professional is not involved, a family member educated by staff prior to the event should be designated to be in charge of walking patterns, protocols, and accepted behaviors. Some green burial operators are routinely on hand to manage and support the family, making sure things are tended to properly. In many cemeteries, the personal touch of the sexton or steward being present is an important part of the experience. Maintenance workers will want to fine tune caring for the area once the mourners have left.

Q. Should we be concerned with the collapsing of the grave?

A. Grave subsidence at 3.5 feet is much less likely to occur than at 5 feet. Soil and moisture are factors, but for the most part, graves can be dug at this depth without fear of collapse. In some soils, cemetery operators choose to lay in temporary plywood supports for the walls that are removed prior to the service. Wide wooden planks set on either edge of the grave provide surer footing for those doing the lowering and will help to prevent the edges from crumbling. When the weather is especially damp, a deeper reservoir dug at one end of the grave will collect excess water, further reinforcing the integrity of the grave.

Q. How are graves laid out in a green section?

A. Plot location can be similar to conventional where families buy plots ahead of time or the decision may be made at the discretion of the sexton, depending on the cemetery's operating plan. Graves set side by side will require a rotation plan, potentially maximizing burial density in the long run. Many green burial cemeteries sell the right to be buried in a certain area but retain the ability to determine the exact location. This is particularly prevalent in woodland burial areas where tree roots, rock, ledge, water and other natural impediments may require the grave to be shifted a distance away from the original site. This also gives the cemetery the ability to prepare graves in fall for winter burial and to follow their own burial plot sequence through the area or the entire cemetery. This is made clear in the contract at the time of purchase.

Q. What do green burial plots cost?

A. Green burial plots need not be different from conventional plot pricing. Although there is maintenance for both, it is simply different, not more or less intensive. In fact, not having to haul around heavy equipment, spread herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers, mow and trim, or clean and repair headstones could mean big savings on perpetual care. What green burial families are paying for is the same thing anyone else is: real estate in a specific location. Whatever the going rate is in your cemetery for a plot should apply universally.

Q. Are co-burials possible in a green cemetery?

A. Depending on the choices made by the operators and trustees, the burial of one full body and the cremated remains of another may be acceptable. Dual occupancy of one grave is generally not feasible, but it is up to the cemetery operators to determine.

Q. Do green cemeteries reuse burial plots?

A. There are no laws against reusing a plot. In many countries, graves are routinely “rented” and refilled at a later date, often removing the bones to an ossuary. Green burial cemeteries have the ability to reuse ground space in the future if desired, but this is not widely debated.

Q. Can cremated remains be scattered in green burial cemeteries?

A. Because of the density and nonbiodegradable content of cremated remains, many green burial cemeteries do not allow scattering. Cremated remains consist of calcium phosphate and sodium and are heavy, apt to smother foliage on the surface. Underground cremated remains create what is essentially a nutrient-deficient salt lick that has no environmental benefits. Still, these remains are better off located in cemeteries for practical or spiritual purposes rather than on people’s mantles and closet shelves, so many green burial cemeteries welcome them.