



Having the Conversation About Greener Funerals

by Emily B. Miller

For funeral consumers who care about the environment, there are many ways to interpret and measure what it means to be “green”. For example, in a household environment, we can go green by focusing on energy-saving appliances, by reducing landfill trash when increasing reuse and composting, or by changing landscaping and lawns to water-wise and native plantings.



While each of these measures is eco-friendly, they have different impacts on resources, waste, and natural environments, so they are green in different ways. Many of us choose to start with achievable, smaller steps to lighten our footprint on the earth, and what is easily achieved varies by context and location.

The nuances of shopping for environmentally friendly funeral services are similar. A family asking for a green funeral could have several different points of emphasis that would impact what disposition and services they ultimately choose. For funeral directors, it's important to ask the questions that help us understand what each family values, so that we are

able to guide them into the funeral choices that best align with their eco-friendly wishes.

What makes a funeral green? Just like the household example, end-of-life services can be judged on their energy usage and carbon emissions footprint, how many single-use virgin materials are consumed during the process, or whether there is a benefit to the land and the ecosystems it supports. Some green consumers will have a strong sense of which of these is most important to them, but others may need to be educated about the different options and the varying impact their funeral's footprint. Of course, green funeral families also share the same concerns as any funeral consumers-



A funeral counselor walks a couple through a green burial site, helping them understand how land stewardship, disposition options, and personal values come together in environmentally responsible funeral planning.

what the arrangements will cost, whether the services fit in with their faith and traditions, and how will the funeral look and feel to participants. Good funeral arranging will help find the compromise between all these considerations, and the buyer will feel satisfied that they have made choices that suit their values.

On the subject of the environmental impacts of a funeral, carbon emissions have become a high-profile topic. (Lower emissions mean a smaller impact on climate change from greenhouse gases.) Flame cremation is known to have the highest emissions of any funeral option, and it even turns the body's carbon directly into atmospheric carbon dioxide in the

afterchamber of the retort. Water cremation and body composting are both reduction dispositions that have reduced carbon emissions.

On the other end of the spectrum, natural burial and conventional burial both sequester the body's carbon underground, keeping it out of the atmosphere. However, the manufacture of concrete vaults is a significant source of greenhouse gases because of the carbon dioxide that gets released when the concrete is cured, so any burial without a vault is greener than burying with one.

Another factor that impacts the overall greenhouse gas emissions of a funeral is the transportation of goods, guests,



and the deceased. Caskets and vaults have a footprint from being manufactured and delivered to your facility. Embalming fluids and other single-use prep room and crematory supplies also contribute to the virgin materials and transportation footprint of a disposition. Even the greener option of body composting requires the delivery of bulking agents like alfalfa that come from industrial-scale agriculture and need to be fertilized, watered, and transported great distances. The body composting process itself sequesters carbon, but when we have to do a ship-out for that service, the climate benefit can be neutralized by the transportation emissions.

Families might also be concerned about single-use goods at a funeral. Caskets are an important part of the way a funeral looks and feels, but shoppers often remark at such a great expense for something that is only seen for a matter of hours. They might find a nice compromise in a biodegradable basket that is made with a lower amount of virgin materials and still looks beautiful. Other families may want to repurpose material like a blanket to make their own shroud, an option which is very eco-friendly but does change the way the viewing and pallbearing feels to participants. It's important for funeral arrangers to explain the way these choices can impact the details of the service. Similarly, the flowers and catering options are opportunities to reduce the amount of landfill waste produced at a funeral, so we should be offering families a range of choices in these areas.

No matter what disposition is chosen at the time of a death, land management is one of our most powerful tools for helping the environment going forward into the future. When a body's compost or burial site is managed for native plant species, it protects biodiversity, supports pollinators, and sequesters carbon from the atmosphere into the ground. Not only do native plantings reduce the maintenance footprint compared to sod lawns, but healthy native ecosystems are able to continue sequestering carbon in perpetuity because they are self-sustaining. Over time, this type of carbon sequestration can offset some of the unavoidable emissions from the travel and supplies for a funeral. That's why natural burial in a conservation setting is the most environmentally friendly choice for end-of-life, because healthy ecosystems support a healthy climate long after the other funeral details have been forgotten. (Body composting can offer this benefit as well, but only when the resulting soil is responsibly managed for conservation.)

Which eco-friendly services your funeral home or cemetery can offer continues to be influenced by what is available and appropriate in your area. Despite geographical limitations, any funeral can be greener through small measures that add up. It's important to get to know the reasons your consumer is asking for an eco-friendly service, so you can guide them through some of the judgment calls around the relative environmental benefits of each detail. Ask them how they interpret being green in their home life and shopping choices. Work with your local vendors, including caterers, livery, and florists, to offer goods and services that include eco-friendly options. Don't assume that being green always means a certain type of funeral or disposition.

Funeral choices can make the biggest impact for the planet if we offer emission- and waste- reducing measures across our whole business, and take every opportunity to manage our properties in harmony with a healthy local ecosystem.



Families take time for quiet reflection in a natural setting, considering funeral choices that balance environmental impact, personal values, and the meaning they want their final arrangements to convey.



Emily B. Miller is a licensed Funeral Director/Embalmer, Certified Life Cycle Celebrant, and member of the Green Burial Council Board of Directors. She has worked in funeral homes and cemeteries of all sizes. In 2020, Emily founded the Colorado Burial Preserve & Cremation Garden as the first cemetery in the state with a habitat restoration mission. She now works as an industry trainer, advocating for a more sustainable profession that helps people engage with the dying process through ritual and the lessons from nature.