

## Guide to environmentally friendly burials

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## Introduction

Many of us think of the environment living on forever. There is certainly a consciousness these days of the importance of protecting it as far as possible from the many, many ways in which man impacts upon it for the worst.

One of the very last impressions which many of us may be seen to make in connection with our own individual impact on the environment is in the laying to rest of our mortal remains. Yet even in this act there are ways in which you and those responsible for your funeral arrangements might act to minimise the impact on the environment.

Not only that, but the decisions made might even go so far as making a small and important contribution to its future sustainability.

The answer lies in keeping burials as green and as environmentally friendly as possible, so this guide will look at just what we mean by being green and in what way this makes for environmental benefits.

Against this background, the guide will consider the different types of burial currently being conducted and take a look at the different types of casket used in them.

Memorials are customarily a central part of many a funeral arrangement, so the guide also aims to come up with a few ideas for those memorials.

By way of a final round up the guide also suggests the sort of questions you might want to ask if you are thinking about or actively planning a green burial.

## **What are the benefits of having a green burial?**

It is sometimes said that our lives might be compared to footprints in the sand – individually unique as they follow their own human journeys, but with a life that is ultimately destined to be washed away by the eternal ebb and flow of the tides.

That is the positive and charitable interpretation of the footprints we leave. But in today's world, the word footprint also encapsulates less favourable connotations – a measure of the less welcome, permanent and enduring impacts of our respective footprints.

### **What is a green burial?**

What makes any human activity or product green is whether or not it is environmentally friendly. That is to say, whether or not it leaves the kind of impact from which the environment never recovers or struggles to overcome. In these terms the green burial might be seen as one which leaves no adverse – or the least adverse – footprint.

With this principle in mind there are many ways in which the practice of burial may be made greener, principally through the use of biodegradable materials ensuring that they are effectively returned to the environment for use again in the future rather than taking decade or centuries before they decompose and are reabsorbed into the land.

This principle of sustainability might help in the choice of materials used in green burials:

- instead of embalming fluid, for example, non-toxic and readily biodegradable dry ice or refrigeration may be used;
- shrouds that are woven and made from such organic materials as linen, cotton or silk;
- natural sources of sustainable (replaceable or already growing) timber to be used in the making of urns and caskets; and
- it is possible to go a step further in the greening of the caskets used by replacing environmentally valuable wood with cardboard or wicker varieties;
- there are even caskets on the market that are made entirely from recycled and eminently biodegradable newspaper – they are called Ecopods and come in a number of different designs and colours.

In order to conserve the sustainable use of precious land in an increasingly overcrowded world, environmentally friendly funerals may make use of green cemeteries in such relatively conventional locations as woodland burial sites, fields, gardens and some of the more unusual and imaginative locations suggested by the UK company [Natural Endings](#).

### **... and the benefits?**

The benefits of green burials stem almost entirely from the conscious effort that goes into making them as sustainable as possible – in terms of the materials used and future land use spared.

It may be worth mentioning two further sources of long term advantage:

- communing with the natural environment and being at one with nature are highly prized objectives of many people. As in life, as in eternal rest, therefore such proximity to all things natural may be an aim of the deceased and a comfort to those who are mourning their passing;

- more prosaically but perhaps no less important is the economic imperative. Green burials – using environmentally materials in naturally sustainable cemeteries - might actually cut the cost of interment. An understanding of how this might be achieved – through the pricing structure of a currently active UK company – is illustrated by [The Green Funeral Company](#). Where loved ones may once have chosen cremation as a more economical alternative to interment, green burials now offer an equally viable option.

## Different types of burials

In the UK, the whole question of burial, where it takes place and how the site is subsequently managed can be a quite complicated matter. The government issued [Guide for Burial Ground Managers](#), for instance, runs to a full 58 pages and includes both traditional and natural cemeteries, those run by local authorities and those privately managed either by individuals, charities or companies.

One of the additional attractions and benefits to be enjoyed from a green burial is the considerably wider range of different types. Freed from the restriction of choosing exactly the same style and method of everyone else, a green burial gives you the opportunity to express more about the personality and character of your loved one.

Being able to choose between different methods, therefore, gives you far more flexibility and creativity in the permanent memorial to the deceased. Just some of the possibilities, for example, include:

### Woodland burials

- there is an increasing number of woodland burial sites around the country – estimates vary, but the [Association of Natural Burial Grounds](#), run by the charity the [Natural Death Centre](#) puts the number at more than 270;
- it is difficult to be more precise since some such sites are located in areas of genuine and properly managed woodland whilst others are simply areas of rough ground attached to or alongside existing cemeteries;
- similarly, some may be large sites that are commercially run, others are tended by small and often local charities;
- although the selection is quite varied, you might still want to check that the site most suitable for you or your loved one is duly registered;

### Upright burials

- the English poet and playwright Ben Johnson, who died as long ago as 1637 is perhaps one of the earliest, [officially recorded upright burials](#);
- he lies buried in this space-saving position not in Poets' Corner but in the equally crowded north aisle of Westminster Abbey;
- another well-known "uprighter" is the eccentric Peter Labilliere who was buried in 1800 atop [Box Hill in Surrey](#) where he could keep his eye over the South Downs and where according to his memorial plaque: "Here lies Major Peter Labilliere, with his head in the ground and his feet in the air";
- since those historic exceptions, however, upright burial has not been at all popular in the UK – despite the clear potential for making better use of restricted space in the country's overcrowded cemeteries;
- one part of the world where it does seem to be gaining ground (literally!) is [Australia](#) – here a company set up in 2010 has been performing upright and environmentally friendly burials of bodies which are first frozen and then wrapped in biodegradable shrouds, in a funeral that costs about half that of the more conventional ceremony;
- time will tell whether its popularity catches on here in the genuinely land strapped UK;

### Meadow burials

- a further example of the natural burial may take place in meadowland, where sites already exist in the UK;

- they might almost be regarded as the forerunners of woodland burial sites – before the woods have actually grown;
- a number of meadowland sites, for example, feature [tree](#) and [wild flower](#) plantings to enhance the natural setting;

### **Burial in your back garden**

- there is perhaps something of a tradition in Britain of loved ones being buried in a favourite spot of their own back garden;
- naturally the space has a special significance for the deceased and may prove an especially fitting memorial for family and friends;
- the website [Garden Law](#) clarifies the legal position – burials in the back garden are perfectly lawful provided there is a death certificate, the death has been registered and the local authority has approved the proposed resting place. Note though that if you ever decide to sell your home, the burial must be disclosed and it may put some people off buying the property.

There exist many different types of environmentally friendly or green burials. The choice is entirely personal, of course, and is likely to reflect the character and personality of the dearly departed.

## Types of caskets

Reflecting ever-increasing concerns to stay green and make use of only sustainable resources in practically everything we do, there are already a surprising number of companies in the UK selling environmentally friendly coffins, caskets and shrouds – a number are listed on the website [Sun Rising](#).

### What makes them environmentally friendly?

Here the key to being green lies in the greatest possible use of fully biodegradable materials;

- this means avoiding the unnecessary use of screws, bolts and other metal fittings, varnishes and toxic glue;
- wood veneer and MDF, for example, both contain the harmful and highly toxic chemical formaldehyde;
- shrouds may be handmade from cotton, felt, fibre, or wool or bought ready made using carefully resourced materials.

### Types

When it comes to resourcing natural materials for environmentally friendly caskets and coffins, the choice is wide, imaginative and extremely inventive.

They are currently being fashioned from some of the following materials:

- wood – of course is a traditional material used for building coffins. Staying green means using sustainably sourced timber or reclaimed and recycled wood with a minimum of metal fixtures and fittings – including, for example, the use of rope handles;
- woven coffins – these represent probably the most imaginative, not to mention ingenious, uses of natural materials, currently including: bamboo, willow and even wild pineapple;
- wood pulp – similarly inventive is the use of cardboard, papier maché and even recycled newspaper, bound together with water-based and non-toxic glues;
- shrouds – natural felt, cotton, wool and even bamboo fibre are all currently used in the manufacture of shrouds from environmentally friendly materials.

Your choice of casket and shroud, in other words, plays an important part in keeping you green and environmentally friendly.

## Memorial ideas

When it comes to memorials to commemorate the life and times of a deceased loved one, the choice is considerably wider than the granite tombstone found in churchyards up and down the land.

Given the very free range of imagination and creativity given to the subject of creating lasting yet sustainable memorials not all of these ideas are likely to appeal to everyone – they range from the sentimental, to interesting to what some people might regard as downright bizarre. But the point is made that death, remembrance and memorials are highly personal matters, to be handled in a similarly personal and individual way.

With those ground rules in mind, the following ideas might provide food for thought:

- **gems** – you might not have thought it, but cremated ashes or even a simple lock of hair can be transformed into a [real diamond](#) and object of beauty that will last forever;
- **vinyl LP** – a somewhat stranger idea, nevertheless marketed by one [UK-based company](#), is to have your mortal remains pressed into a vinyl recording;
- **eternal reefs** – a development and modern-day updating of the ancient custom of burial at sea comes in the form of an “[eternal reef](#)”, where cremated ashes may be incorporated into a specially formulated cast concrete urn, dropped into the ocean and provide a permanent reef to help sustain marine life;
- **shelves for life** – even your [household shelves](#) need never be thrown away if you choose these wooden units which may be taken down and reassembled as a coffin when your days are done. Plans are even available for a DIY build;
- **space, the final frontier** – for a funeral that is truly out of this world, an [American company](#) offers to launch your cremated remains into deep space;
- **fireworks** – if you are still determined to go out with a bang but cannot quite afford a stellar mission, there is always the firework display designed – by a [UK-based company](#) – to incorporate your ashes into loud and colourful pyrotechnics.

These few examples might help go to show that when it comes to memorial ideas, the potential for sentiment, imagination and creativity is huge and the sky is quite literally the limit.

## What to ask if you are planning a green burial

If you have decided that death is too important an event to treat it in anything but an environmentally friendly, green and naturally respectful way, there may still be questions in your mind about how best to achieve that end result.

In a world where there are likely to be many companies trying to steal an advertising edge by – falsely – claiming that their products and services are environmentally friendly, it is important to be able to distinguish between the genuine and those that are less so.

Here are some of the questions you might want to ask in order to help sort one from the other:

- do you only use or accept entirely biodegradable, environmentally friendly or green coffins and caskets?
- is “crem film” allowed as lining for coffins? – this is a plastic film typically used when preparing bodies for cremation and is in fact required for those purposes by some [local authorities](#);
- to what depth is the grave dug? If it is shallower, the better are the chances of a more natural aerobic process of decomposition;
- do you actively discourage the use of embalming fluid in any but the most exceptional of circumstances?
- what steps have been taken by the site management to improve wildlife habitats and enhance biodiversity? And does any planting policy require the use only of native trees, flowers and shrubs?
- tell me about the types of memorials you allow;
- are there environmentally conscious restrictions on the kind of items that may be put inside the casket or coffin?
- are there any restrictions on what can be left on top of the burial site?
- do you allow funerals to be conducted without the presence of a funeral director? Funeral directors may otherwise exert undue influence that undermines the best efforts to ensure that every detail is as environmentally friendly as possible.

With just a little research you may soon discover that you are able to determine your own indicators of good, green and environmentally practice. By then, you will already have an opinion as to how these questions ought to be answered by a genuinely green service provider. The questions suggested might help to jog your memory, when it comes to finally settling on a natural burial site.

## Summary

Natural, environmentally friendly burials may help to show people that you care not only for a deceased loved one, but also a world around them that remains to be enjoyed by everyone.

This guide has attempted a review of some of the principal benefits to keeping burials green and in keeping with the natural and sustainable world.

It has done this by considering at least some of the options in an increasingly wide range of choices when it comes to the manner of burial and the type of casket used.

Memorials may be a question of peculiarly individual taste – and not all of course are likely to be everyone's – but there is an ever-increasing range of choice.

Finally, you might want to check the credentials of anyone offering services or products under the environmentally friendly banner with a few well-chosen questions of your own.

