



# Why and how to plan your own green funeral

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ILLUSTRATION BY JAIMIE SHELTON

Susan Greer was stuck at home, sick with a cough, listening to the radio, when she first heard about natural burial. “It was my a-ha moment,” recalls the former marketing strategist. “It just seemed to make so much sense that your last act, instead of putting carbon into the atmosphere, is giving back to the earth.” Four years later, Greer is executive director of the Natural Burial Association and spends her days raising awareness about eco-friendly death-care options.

In Canada, the green-funeral movement is slowly gaining ground thanks to advocates like Greer, though the country is lagging behind Britain and the United States. A recent Angus Reid survey conducted by the Natural Burial

Association found that 53 per cent of respondents had never heard of a natural or green burial; after being made aware of the possibility, 68 per cent said they'd consider it. Some religious traditions, such as Jewish and Muslim burial practices, are already green, in that they avoid embalming and cremation (bodies are returned to the earth in their entirety). Other religions – Hinduism, for example – view cremation as a way of honouring the dead, which means green burials may not be an option.

Natural or green burial entails placing a body directly into the earth, wrapped in a shroud or laid in a biodegradable casket, in a designated section of a cemetery. The trend is gaining popularity in Canada thanks in part to increased awareness about the environmental impacts of more traditional burial methods, such as embalming and cremation. Advocates eschew the use of embalming fluids, for example, because they release toxins into the earth. And while Canada's cremation rate has been rising for decades – it reached nearly 75 per cent in 2021, according to the Cremation Association of North America – the average cremation requires 28 gallons of fuel (around one tankful of gas for an SUV).

Greer, who bikes almost everywhere, eats little meat and shops for second-hand clothing, aims to die the way she lives and, one day, plans to be laid to rest in a natural burial ground near her hometown of Toronto. Generally, a green cemetery resembles a meadow or forest, owing to remains that nourish the soil, and graves are marked by simple stones or native plants rather than tombstones (many grounds have communal memorials, such as names inscribed on a boulder). And natural burial grounds have around 300 plots per acre, whereas conventional cemeteries typically have more than 1000 per acre.

A grave at Salt Spring Island Natural Cemetery in Salt Spring Island, B.C.

STASIA GARRAWAY/SUPPLIED

Those planning for a natural burial, however, have few choices. A “standalone” is a burial ground created in natural settings and not connected to conventional cemeteries. These are wild and lush spaces, void of tombstones, that people are encouraged to use in much the same way they would a park. Canada has only one standalone that’s open to the public, the Salt Spring Island Natural Cemetery, in B.C. More common, but still relatively scarce, are “hybrids” or small natural-burial areas within traditional cemeteries. (Offerings range by province; Ontario and B.C. have just more than a handful of hybrid cemeteries each, for instance, while PEI and Newfoundland & Labrador have none). In both standalone and hybrid burial areas, the body is buried about one metre deep, where the rich soil strata is located.

Greer suggests those interested in a green funeral communicate their wishes to family, and put aside funds but don't prepay for anything; new hybrids, and possibly even standalones, are popping up across the country. She also recommends taking loved ones to visit the space, preferably during the summer, when wildflowers and other vegetation are in full bloom.

### The death positivity movement is growing. Here's how to get involved

Some Canadians are crossing the border for even more options in death care. Earlier this year, Return Home – the world's first large-scale terramation facility, based just outside Seattle – began offering its service to Canadian residents. Also known as human composting or natural organic reduction, terramation transforms human remains into compost, or nutrient-rich soil, that can be returned to the earth. A deceased body is placed in a sealed, temperature- and moisture-controlled vessel with organic materials such as alfalfa, straw and sawdust (many families will also add letters, flowers or other organic materials into the vessel).

Oxygen flows through the vessel, activating microbes in the body. After around 30 days, the body transforms into soil and is then screened for inorganic material, such as implants, which are recycled. The soil then sits for another 30 days to cure before being delivered to the family. The process, which costs US\$4,950 (\$6,790), yields around 90 kilograms of soil (10 to 15 burlap bags full), which loved ones can use to plant a memorial garden, flower bed, trees or even scatter in much the same way as ashes. Some donate leftovers to conservation areas.

Return Home's CEO, Micah Truman, says the appeal of terramation spans all generations. "It's about a desire to return to the earth, to restart that whole cycle of life. That's what drives a lot of people; it's a very heartfelt and instinctive decision," says Truman. Washington was the first state to legalize human composting, in 2019, and Return Home has served almost 100 families since, including Canadians (Oregon, Colorado and Vermont have also hopped on board, while California will develop regulations for human

composting by 2027). The process is still illegal in Canada, which Truman attributes to legislative hurdles, though he says the demand is there.

### **Want to live a fuller life? Then we need to start talking about dying**

If social media is any indication, interest in terramation is growing rapidly. In just one year, Return Home has amassed half a million followers on TikTok, where endearing staff describe the process with a hint of humour and, most of all, accessibly. While green-burial methods and outright body composting may shock or disturb some people, particularly traditionalists, industry experts are quick to point out that we are simply returning to the way our ancestors did things – long before the death-care industry became commercialized.

Winnipeg funeral director Richard Rosin explains that throughout history, people died at home and were tended to by loved ones. Embalming was popularized during the Civil War, when soldiers died overseas; embalming was a way to preserve bodies so that they could be shipped home to their families. Times have changed, of course, and Rosin, who also sits on the board of directors of the Green Burial Society of Canada, adds, “your environmental legacy doesn’t stop when your heart does.”

### **How much does a natural burial cost?**

In Canada, each cemetery sets its own rates. According to Canadian Funerals Online, cremation is around one-quarter the cost of a conventional burial, which ranges from \$5,000 to \$15,000 (which might explain why cremation is gaining popularity). Green burials fall somewhere in between because of the modest container used and lack of a concrete burial vault or grave marker.

However, prices for an eco-friendly burial can be costlier, depending on where you live. In Ontario, every cemetery is required to have a Care and

Maintenance Trust Fund to cover upkeep (when a lot is purchased, 40 per cent of the cost goes into this fund). In 2020, the Ontario government required new cemetery operators to pay up to \$100,000 prior to beginning operations (think of it as a licensing fee); in January, 2022, that fee was raised by 65 per cent to \$165,000. This means start-up natural funeral operators are at a disadvantage because they're the new kids on the block, so to speak.

The fee does vary by province; it's 0 per cent in Quebec and New Brunswick, 15 per cent in Nova Scotia and 25 per cent in British Columbia (the national average is 13 per cent; in the U.S., it's 10 to 15 per cent). Susan Greer, of the National Burial Association, questions why Ontario's fee is so much higher than other provinces and says the organization would like to see that fee halved. "There should be some fee so that municipalities have resources to take care of cemeteries in perpetuity," she explains. "But Ontario's fee is gouging the elderly and unfairly inflates the price of burial."

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