

Green

By Patti Martin Bartsche



Green Survey

In 2008, Kates-Boylston Publications conducted a first-of-its-kind green consumer study. At the time, it was inevitable that if you opened a newspaper, turned on the TV or browsed the internet, you would see something about “green” or “eco-friendly.”

While businesses were quick to respond to consumers’ evolving preferences for “green,” the funeral profession was taking a more measured approach, with many consumers not understanding the connection between “green” and funerals.

In fact, as the 2008 survey found, only 7% of respondents had ever attended a green burial. When asked “If you were offered the choice of a ‘green’ burial (no embalming, no metal casket), would this be something you would consider?” 43% said yes.

What a difference 13 years makes.

Consumers are not only continuing to embrace “green” in life, but increasing numbers are opting for green in death, according to a new consumer survey conducted by Kates-Boylston.

The 2021 Green Funerals and Burials Survey found that 51% of respondents have attended a green burial. When asked whether a green burial would be something they would consider, if offered, more than 84% of respondents said “yes.”

“That’s good news, but I’m not really surprised,” Ed Bixby, president of the Green Burial Council said. “Back in 2008, there had not been a lot of natural burials conducted. That’s all changed. In the last 18 months, we’ve seen the largest increase since we started offering natural burials. People are seeing for themselves what it is all about ... they have a better understanding what it means to be green in death.”

Darren Crouch, owner of Passages International Inc., agrees.

“People are seeking out green in every other area of their daily lives,”

said Crouch, who was elected to the Green Burial Council board of directors in 2018. “I’m not surprised that they want a greener option in death.”

That wasn’t always the case.

“I think (when the first survey was done) people were (already) living a greener life,” said Crouch. “They just didn’t know they could have a greener death.”

When he founded Passages in 1999, green and nontraditional funeral options were still in their infancy.

Crouch’s original concept was to provide funeral directors with a more dignified and profitable, eco-friendly temporary container in which to return cremated remains when a family declined an urn.

In those early days, Crouch recalled, funeral directors would tell him that “no one was asking for green.”

Demographics

Total responses: **500**

Age groups:

25 - 34 (25.8%)

35 - 44 (45.0%)

45 - 54 (16.8%)

> 54 (12.4%)

Household Income:

Middle II, High II, High III, Middle I, High I

Country: **United States**

Gender: **Female (45.0%), Male (55.0%)**

Which then led Crouch to ask whether the funeral director talked to the family about green options.

"The answer was usually no," Crouch said.

These days, not talking about green funeral and natural burial options could have a negative impact on a firm.

"It can't be about what a funeral professional thinks a family wants; it has to be what the family wants," Crouch said. "Many individuals are living their lives mindful of their impact on earth. When the time comes, these individuals will likely look for funeral homes with the same environmental consciousness. If you're not talking about green and natural burial, families will find someone who is."

While green consumers may have once been considered a niche market, most consumers now have some form of sustainable requirements integrated into their purchase habits.

The 2019 Retail and Sustainability Survey showed that more than two-thirds of the respondents consider sustainability when making a purchase and are willing to pay more for sustainable products. And the A.T. Kearney's Earth Day 2019 study

similarly found that more than 70% of consumers consider their impact on the environment when shopping.

Does this desire to be environmentally friendly continue into death? The answer is an overwhelming yes, according to the Kates-Boylston survey, with more than 68% saying it was extremely important (39.8%) or very important (28.4%). An

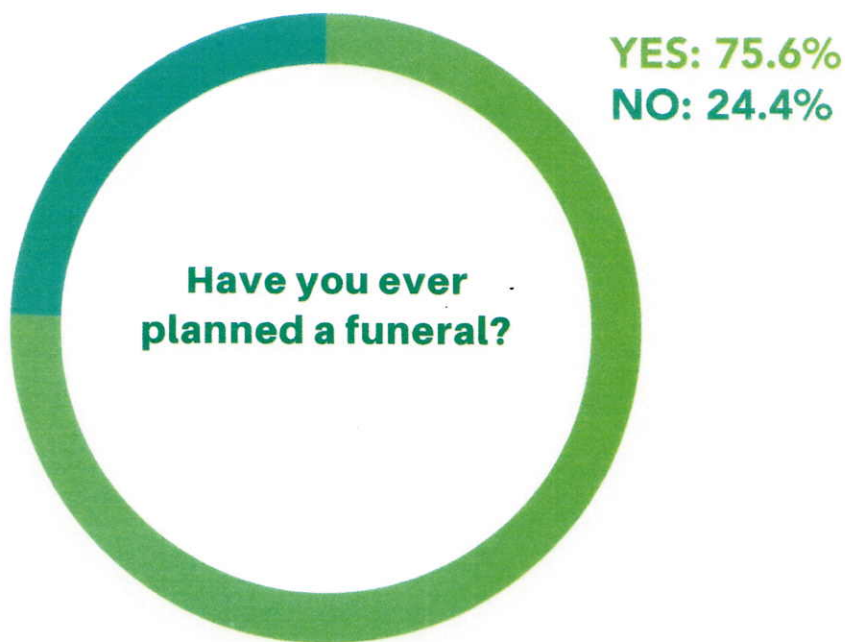
additional 22.6% said it was moderately important while only 9.2% said it was not important at all.

Robert Prout, co-owner of Prout Funeral Home in Verona, New Jersey, says the figures should not come as a surprise to anyone in funeral service.

"The public is already there, and as an industry, we haven't even approached the curve yet," Prout pointed out. "Funeral service cannot continue to stick its head in the sand."

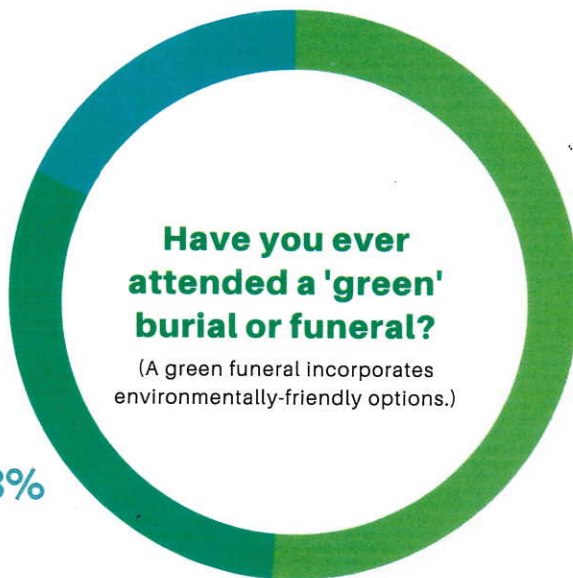
For nearly a century, the Prout family has been serving families in northern New Jersey. The firm's decision to offer green funerals and natural burials was a natural extension of what the Prout family had already been doing to limit their environmental impact, including installing 150 solar panels in 2005 to power the funeral home and getting involved in soil conservation efforts. "I even bought a Prius in 2005 and kept it on the road for 14 years," Prout added. "Green is really a lifestyle decision for us."

Prout likens green burials to cremation in 1960. "You had funeral directors saying, 'My families would never choose anything like it (cremation),'" he said. "And guess what? Forty years later, guess whose families are choosing it?"





YES: 63.95%
NO: 36.05%



YES: 51.2%
NO: 30.8%
NOT SURE: 18%



EXTREMELY FAMILIAR: 36.4%
MODERATELY FAMILIAR: 35.6%
NOT FAMILIAR AT ALL: 28%

It's a comparison that Barbara Kemmis, executive director of the Cremation Association of North America, understands.

"There were many who said that cremation would never gain acceptance, and as well all know, the cremation rate is now over 50%," she said. "What we are seeing now are a number of funeral homes, cemeteries and combination operations looking for ways to make their businesses greener to target this population for whom green values are important in life and express that those green values in their death."

While the Green Burial Council defines green burial "as a way of caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact that aids in the conservation of natural resources, reduction of carbon emissions, protection of worker health and the restoration and/or preservation of habitat," Prout and Crouch acknowledged that "green" is a term open to individual interpretation.

"Many people view cremation as a green option," said Prout, whose firm was the first in New Jersey to receive Green Burial Council certification, "but a true natural burial, in many regards, is more environmentally-friendly than cremation."

But that doesn't mean that green is an all or nothing concept.

"Some people are under the impression that they have to be wrapped in a shroud and placed straight in the ground," Prout said. "That's just not true. There are varying shades of green. It could be using a sustainable casket or choosing formaldehyde-free embalming. There are a variety of options available to families."

Those options could involve being interred in a traditional cemetery buried in a shroud or a biodegradable casket, Prout said. "This is where funeral directors need to step up, not just to educate their families ... but themselves. Before saying 'no,' they need to gather all the information to present to families."

According to the survey, there are many things families interested in green want to learn about, including environmentally-friendly burial offerings (58%), biodegradable/green caskets (56%), green memorialization products (44%), burial in a green cemetery (41%) and biodegradable urns (38%).

These numbers should serve as a wake-up call for funeral professionals who are content to continue “business as usual.”

“What we need to do is bring green to the forefront in our service and product offerings,” Kemmis said.

“So many cremation families have indicated to us that they might have selected a scattering tube or biodegradable urn if they had been on display,” she added. “Consumers are driving green, and they don’t want to settle.”

Crouch agrees.

“Bringing green products into the selection room is necessary,” he said. “Think of the funeral experience for a family like going to an automobile dealership. Families should be able to pick and choose ... they should be able to see all their options.”

For Crouch that doesn’t necessarily mean separating those choices. “You don’t have to put the ‘green’ products in one place and the traditional products on the other side,” he said. “You can put all the caskets together, all the urns together, as an example. Let the families look, ask questions about the wicker casket, biodegradable urns and scattering tubes, and give them the information they want – and need.”

Personalization continues to grow in importance for families. In the 2008 survey, 60% of respondents said personalization was very important and 25% said it was somewhat important. In comparison, respondents in the 2021 survey said personalization was extremely important (48%), very important (31%) or somewhat important (14%).



EXTREMELY IMPORTANT:
39.8%

VERY IMPORTANT:
28.4%

MODERATELY IMPORTANT:
22.6%

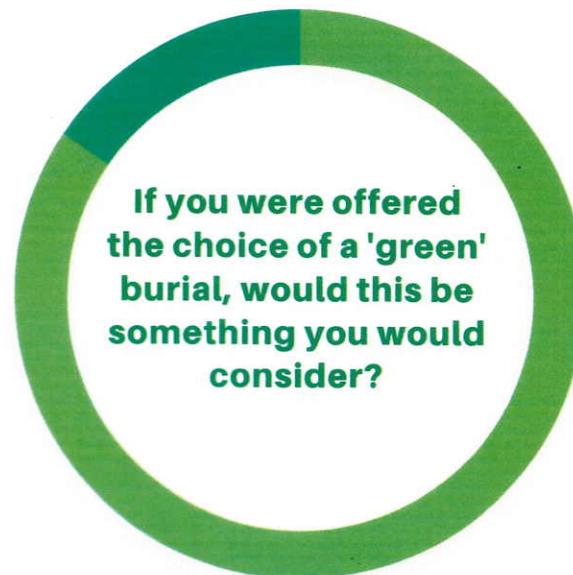
NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT:
9.2%

EXTREMELY IMPORTANT:
48.4%

VERY IMPORTANT:
30.6%

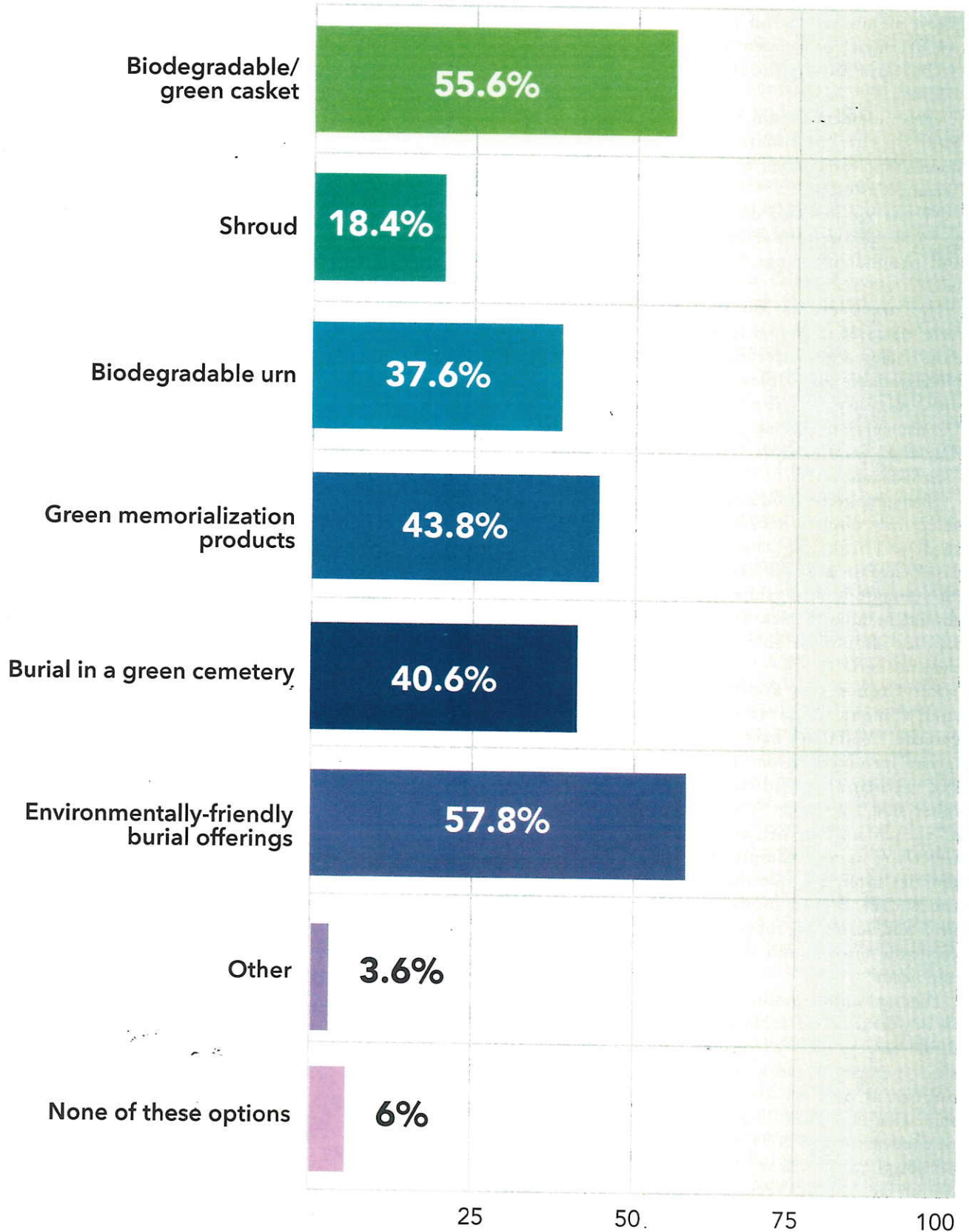
MODERATELY IMPORTANT:
13.6%

NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT:
7.4%



YES: 84.4%
NO: 15.6%

If you were to choose green burial for yourself or loved one, which of the following would you be interested in learning more about?



When it comes to personalization, it's important to understand that many "green" families are looking for more than just products ... they're looking for involvement, said Brian Flowers, managing funeral director and green burial coordinator, Moles Farewell Tributes – Bayview Chapel & Greenacres Memorial Park in Washington.

"A natural burial or greener funeral service gives families a closure that is probably more impactful," said Flowers, a former Green Burial Council president. "Natural burial allows families to become participants in the care for their dead ... and nothing is more personal than that."

Flowers came to Moles farewell Tributes and Greenacres Memorial Park to develop The Meadow at Greenacres Memorial Park in 2009, western Washington's first certified green burial ground.

Families can lay their loved ones to rest in a serene and natural environment, Flowers said, which is more in-line with how they lived their lives. "It's a way to give people the opportunity to naturally return people to the earth," he pointed out.

And that, Flowers said, is what many families who choose green want.

"Families choose green because of the environmental benefits," he said. "And from my experience, families who are part of a natural burial come away with a deep sense of meaning from the experience because they have been a part of something that was not consumer driven but was tangible and meaningful to them and the way they – and their loved one – live their lives."

Prout puts it this way: "Natural or a shade of green burial is a continuation of their lifestyle – to all of a sudden stop and say you can't have that in their death ritual just doesn't make sense to them."

Opting for a "green" death experience doesn't mean that families



If you were to plan a green funeral, would you contact a funeral home to help you plan it?

YES: 85%
NO: 15%

don't value the role of funeral service or funeral directors. In fact, according to the 2021 survey, 85% of respondents said they would contact a funeral director if they were to plan a green burial.

That makes sense to Julia Prout, a fourth-generation funeral director and Prout's daughter.

"My generation, we've been accustomed to being able to choose reusable bags and environmentally friendly lightbulbs – the steel straws over the plastic straws – having that choice is just commonplace," she said.

"It just makes sense to have that choice when you're looking at funeral options as well," Julia Prout added. Most people in my generation, when they become the age when they need to start making funeral arrangements – either for themselves or for their parents –

they're just going to assume those options are readily available because they've been readily available for most of their adult lives ... and they are going to contact a funeral director to help them."

About this survey

The 2008 consumer survey was sent out to 400 people over the age of 50. The respondents were overwhelmingly female (71%) and 64% took home a yearly income of more than \$50,000.

The 2021 survey was conducted online and includes responses from 500 ranging from 25 to 54-plus (146 were between the ages of 45 and older). By gender, respondents were nearly split, 45% female, 55% male. Forty-four percent of respondents made between \$50,000 and \$99,999. •

COMING NEXT MONTH:
American Funeral Director is teaming up with Passages International for a new series to help you better serve today's greener consumers.