



Glossary of Green Burial Terms

Adapted vegetation: Non-invasive, beneficial plants (not noxious weeds) that have adapted to the specific locality; provides habitat and requires little or no maintenance.

At need arrangements: Decisions and purchases made at the time of death rather than in advance, including selection of gravesite, burial container, type of service, etc. (see also *pre-need arrangements*).

Best practices: A professional method or procedure, accepted or prescribed as being the most effective way to achieve stated goals.

Bier: A raised device or platform that holds the casket, either during a vigil or funeral service.

Biodegradable containers: Caskets and shrouds capable of being decomposed by bacteria or other living organisms; often made of plant or animal fiber (wicker, sea grass, paper, linen, cotton, wool, willow, bamboo, etc.). Metals, glues, resins, plastics and other synthetics are non-biodegradable.

Blended funerals: Funerals that combine conventional funeral practices with home funeral and/or green burial practices; may include the use of a funeral director for certain aspects of care, such as obtaining, completing and filing paperwork or transporting the body. Families may have a home funeral without having a green burial and visa versa. Blended funerals offer families more options, especially when certain options are not available in their area.

Burial density: The size, depth, ratio and distance of burial plots from each other in an acre of cemetery. Green burial plots are typically much larger than conventional burial plots and may accommodate the terrain rather than be laid out in rows. Burial density also indicates if more than one body may be buried in one plot over time (a practice that is common elsewhere in the world; see also *serial burial*).

Burial grounds: Burial grounds, cemeteries and preserves are all different names used in relationship with conservation burial grounds.

Caskets: Containers for the dead, previously called coffins. The terminology appears to have evolved as a marketing tool to emphasize the precious cargo. "Casket" (from Middle English *casse*, and Anglo-Norman French, *cassette*) was originally used to denote a small ornamental box, case, or chest for carrying jewels, letters or other valuable items. Conventional caskets are built of steel, copper, and other metals, fiberglass, and exotic woods. Many are dressed with symbolic or religious icons, jewels, engravings, fittings, or trimming (fabric lining).

Casket carts, carriages, or wagons: A non-motorized means of transporting the body to the gravesite.

Celebrant: A professional trained in designing and officiating at customized ceremonies that reflect the needs, beliefs, and values of the person being honored. Many celebrants are trained in non-denominational and/or interfaith rituals. Many clergy are celebrants but not all celebrants are ordained clergy.

Cenotaph: A monument, wall, bench, stone, or other structure engraved with the name(s) of the dead; often placed in a central location in a cemetery and used in place of an individual grave marker.

Clergy: A person ordained to perform specific religious duties; the duties and titles vary among religions (minister, brother/sister, pastor, rector, priest, deacon, apostle, bishop, chaplain, rabbi, etc.)

Coffins: Six- or eight-sided containers for the dead used for burial or cremation. Eight-sided coffins, also called “toe-pinchers,” may be designed to conserve wood or to emphasize the shape of the human inside (wide shoulders tapering to small feet). Plain pine boxes tend to be thought of as coffins, though there is no limitation. Derived from the Greek word *kophinos*, meaning “basket.”

Committal service: An elective ritual that occurs after a funeral service ideally at the graveside; literally “committing” the body or ashes to the earth and the care of God.

Companion grave: A grave in which two bodies are buried side by side in the same unit.

Conservation: The act of preserving, protecting, or restoring the natural environment, natural ecosystems, vegetation, and wildlife.

Conservation Burial Grounds: A type of natural cemetery that is established in partnership with a conservation organization and includes a conservation management plan that upholds best practices and provides perpetual protection of the land according to a conservation easement or deed restriction.

Conservation easements: Voluntary, legal agreements between a landowner and a land trust (or government agency) that permanently limits the uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values.

Conservation Management Plan: A working plan that is a tool for identifying and implementing the practices needed to properly manage a conservation property.

Conventional cemetery: A cemetery that requires the use of a concrete or fiberglass grave liner and a hard-bottom casket; also known as a “lawn cemetery” or a “modern cemetery.” Prior to the establishment of modern cemeteries, most burial occurred in churchyards or on family land and was environmentally friendly. Modern cemetery requirements are dictated by “convention” rather than law.

Cremation: The process of reducing the body of the deceased to bone fragments and ashes by the use of high heat; the cremation of an average body uses enough natural gas and electricity to produce 140 lbs. of CO².

Decomposition: The breakdown of the body by natural means (soil, water, heat and microbes in balance); natural decomposition, the goal of green burial, occurs when no chemicals or non-biodegradable elements (steel, resins, fabrics, cement vaults) impede the process or attempt to preserve the body.

2015 Prepared by Lee Webster and Meryllynne Rush for the, Green Burial Council, www.greenburialcouncil.org;
Updated 2019 by Lee Webster, Heidi Hannapel, Laura Starkey, and Caroline Youngue

Deed restrictions: Private agreements listed in the deed that restrict the use of the land. [See *Conservation easements*]

Dry ice: The solid form of carbon dioxide; may be used to cool and preserve a body temporarily during a *home funeral (home vigil)*. Dry ice must be handled carefully to avoid skin burns and requires good ventilation due to off-gassing of CO².

Ecologically appropriate features: Natural, inanimate elements of the landscape such as rocks, water features, native or adapted vegetation, and un-vegetated ground.

Embalming: The process of removing blood and fluids from the dead body and inserting preservatives, surfactants, solvents, and coloration to slow decomposition and improve looks for a period of up to two weeks. Organs are punctured and drained of fluid with the use of a sharp instrument called a trocar; waste is disposed of in a standard septic system or municipal wastewater treatment plant.

Embalming fluid: An array of chemicals, including benzene, methanol, ethyl alcohol, and ethylene glycol (antifreeze). Formaldehyde, which constitutes anywhere from 5 to 29% of the solution, is associated with increased risk of ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), leukemia, lymph hematopoietic malignancies, and brain cancer in embalmers.

Endowment funds: Funds required by most states for long-term cemetery maintenance; also called “perpetual care” funds.

Fieldstone: A naturally formed stone harvested directly from the earth on or near the cemetery property; they may be engraved, left in their natural form on a grave surface, and not polished or set in footings.

Geographic Information System (GIS): The system used to capture, track, and record grave locations by source data, including latitude, longitude and elevation coordinates.

Global Positioning System (GPS): A radio navigation system utilizing satellites that is often used in green cemeteries in lieu of monuments to establish and map grave location. GPS is accurate in all weather conditions and all hours of the day, making it universally accessible in most locations.

Green (natural) Burial: 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. Green burial necessitates the use of non-toxic and biodegradable materials, such as caskets, shrouds, and urns.

Green Burial Ground: Green burial or a green cemetery is a generalized term often used synonymously with natural burial.

Green burial movement: The growing interest in, development of, and grassroots advocacy for, green (natural) burial throughout the world.

Green cemetery: See *Green Burial Ground*.

Green embalming fluid: A biodegradable, non-toxic, non-carcinogenic, and formaldehyde-free alternative to conventional embalming fluid. The process of embalming is the same regardless of which fluid is used.

Green embalming or professional green body preparation: The services provided by a funeral director that will culminate in a green burial; non-invasive, natural means of cleansing and preparing the body. If embalming is necessary or requested, the GBC approves an essential oil-based product.

Green funeral: A general term used to describe post-death care, from death to disposition, using only natural means (nontoxic preservation techniques and organic materials with minimal carbon footprint); sometimes confused with the term “home funeral,” “green burial,” or “home burial.”

Green-washing: The act of deceptively marketing goods or services by hiding dubious aspects of their environmental profile. In the case of green burial, the full picture of environmentally sound practices is important. Using a casket of organic materials but made by using fossil fuels and child labor and transported 3000 miles to its destination is not considered “green” (environmentally sound).

Habitat conservation: A land management practice that conserves, protects and restores habitat for plants and wildlife; an essential element of conservation burial practices.

Hemp ropes or straps: Naturally made assistive devices for lowering coffins and shrouded bodies into the ground during natural burial, usually involving family and friends.

Home burial: The practice of full body interment on residential land, usually in a rural setting. Local zoning and health department regulations apply, as do state-approved setbacks for known sources of water, buildings and highways. Often these are considered family cemeteries and must be established and reported as such to government agencies, and are usually restricted to blood relatives or extended family.

Home funeral: The process of family and friends, next of kin, or designated agent retaining custody and control of the body for the time period between death and disposition (burial or cremation); sometimes referred to as *home vigil* or DIY funeral. A home funeral involves bathing and dressing the body and using dry ice as a preservative; it commonly lasts 1-3 days. A *home funeral guide* may provide education and support either prior to or during this time period. For many the experience is about avoiding institutional settings and providing personalized care. Typically, family and friends visit during the home funeral.

Home funeral movement: The growing interest in, grassroots advocacy for, and support of, home funeral; the home funeral movement started in the 1980’s.

Home vigil: A home vigil is similar to a home funeral; the terms may be used interchangeably. A home vigil may refer to the practice of family and friends sitting with the body continuously while lying in honor in the home, or it may simply refer to the time period from death to disposition.

Hybrid Burial Ground: A conventional cemetery that offers the essential aspects of green burial, either throughout the cemetery or in a designated “green burial” section. Green Burial Council certified Hybrid Burial Grounds do not require the embalming of decedents and must allow for any kind of eco-friendly burial containers, including shrouds.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) System: A system in which biological, cultural, mechanical/physical and/or chemical factors are evaluated to create a long-term pest management plan that minimizes danger to people, property, and the environment; frequently used in green burial cemeteries to enhance the environmental mission.

Interment: Burial of the full body or the cremated remains of the deceased in a grave.

Invasive plants: Plant species that aggressively adapt and excessively reproduce to a specific environment, potentially choking out native plants and changing the ecological balance.

Islamic burial: Any of a number of burial practices common to the Islamic faith, depending on the sect, including: collective bathing of the body, shrouding of the body, prayer (*salah*), unfettered burial of the shrouded body in the grave within 24 hours, and positioning of the head facing towards Mecca. Cremation is forbidden to Muslims.

Jewish burial: Any of a number of burial practices common to the Jewish faith, including: burial within one day of death, wrapping the body in a white linen shroud made without knots, using a plain, wooden coffin containing no metal, and providing for direct contact with the earth (achieved by drilling holes in the bottom of the coffin, using a bottomless vault, or having a green burial).

Life cycle assessment or analysis: The analysis of the potential impact on the environment of a particular product, process or service over its lifespan, including its extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal.

Life cycle costing (LCC): The accounting process used to evaluate the economic possibilities of products or systems over their useful lives by evaluating the cost of operation and maintenance.

Lowering device: A mechanical device used in a conventional cemetery that aids in lowering a casket into the ground. *Hemp ropes or straps* are often used for this purpose in a green burial.

Meadow burial: Burial in a field-like setting where grasses are allowed to grow and are mowing occurs once a year; a green burial practice.

Memorialization: The process of honoring the dead by marking where a burial has taken place; can include an engraved headstone or stone monument with a written account of the person being commemorated, a QR code, a photo, object, or in the case of a green or natural burial, a fieldstone, wooden bench, tree, shrub, or sculptural art using natural materials. Use of an engraved headstone or monument was, until the mid-1800's, a practice affordable by only the affluent.

Memorial service: A gathering of mourners at which the body is not present.

Native vegetation: Plants that are indigenous to a specific locality that provide natural habitat while requiring no maintenance.

Natural Burial: See *Green Burial*.

Natural Burial Grounds: The term used by the Green Burial Council to designate a cemetery that offers the essential aspects of green burial and uses practices/ protocols that conserve energy, minimize waste, and do not require the use of toxic chemicals. A *Natural Burial Ground* achieves GBC certification by prohibiting any part of a vault (lid, slab or partitioned liner), burial of decedents that have been embalmed with toxic chemicals, and burial containers not made from natural/plant derived materials. A GBC certified Natural Burial Ground must have a program of *Integrated Pest Management* (IPM) in place and must be designed, operated and maintained to produce a naturalistic appearance based on use of plants and materials native to the region and patterns of landscape derived from, and compatible with, regional ecosystems.

Natural viewing: The viewing of an un-embalmed body; typically the body has been prepared for viewing in the home or in an outdoor setting.

Opening and closing: The digging and filling of a grave, the fee for which is separate from that of the burial plot. Some green cemeteries allow families to assist in digging the grave, though many cemeteries prefer a groundskeeper to perform this task for the protection of surrounding vegetation and for safety and liability reasons. Many green cemeteries allow or encourage families to replace the soil layers (fill the grave) as a part of the graveside ceremony.

Permaculture: Agricultural systems and principles that are sustainable and self-sufficient; working with natural forces in land management and conservation to minimize labor and maximize efficiency without depleting the land.

Plat map: A specialized map that identifies where all the plots will be located. Some green cemeteries do not follow a rigid placement of *plots* on a *plat* grid.

Plot: The space in which a body is buried.

Preneed arrangements: Arrangements made prior to death, including gravesite selection. *Preneed arrangements* can be made without pre-paying, although funeral homes and cemeteries usually encourage pre-paying.

Regional harvesting: The practice of acquiring materials generated from within a 500-mile radius of the job site through harvesting, extraction or processing.

Restoration ecology: The practice of renewing, restoring, or assisting in the recovery and management of degraded, damaged, or destroyed ecosystems and habitat. Restoration cemeteries may have areas in need of environmental restoration of plant systems, or need supplementation to provide optimum habitat for wildlife to restore the proper balance to the ecosystem within and surrounding the burial ground. Along with improving biodiversity, restoration ecology also involves developing sustainable cultural practices and providing regional and historical context.

Restored green cemetery: An unused or unkempt cemetery that has been purchased, gifted or otherwise transferred to be revitalized and repurposed through green burial; it may have been historical, abandoned, filled up, under-funded, or reverted from private to municipal.

Serial burial: The practice of re-using burial space after a determined length of time, usually 20-30 years, ad infinitum. This practice is common in other countries; there are no known laws against it in the US. By contrast, conventional US cemeteries may allow a one-time *double depth* burial where a spouse is buried on top of an existing grave.

Shrouding board: A board designed to securely carry a shroud-wrapped body to the grave; also known as a body board or trundle coffin. The board may be simple or ornate, and may be buried with the body or removed prior to interment for re-use.

Shroud: Fabric cloth or sheet that is wrapped around the deceased for burial; often shrouds have a built-in rigid board for carrying, or are carried on a *shrouding board*.

Sustainable agriculture: Food, fiber, or other plant or animal farming techniques that support the environmental mission and contribute to the financial health of a green burial cemetery.

Techni-Ice: An effective, non-toxic, reusable dry ice replacement used to cool the body of the deceased; it is purchased in plastic sheets, activated and frozen. Unlike *dry ice*, it does not off-gas or cause vapors or condensation, and can be re-used indefinitely

Wake: A period of keeping *watch* or *vigil* with the body of the deceased that may involve prayer, music, reading, storytelling or other rituals and family traditions; derived from a time when witnesses stayed by the body to be certain the person did not “wake up.”

Woodland burial: A burial in the forest among the trees; gravesites are left alone to naturalize with little or no interference from groundskeepers other than to provide access to the gravesite.

Xeriscaping: Landscaping that conserves water by using plants with low water needs, soil amendments that retain moisture, and mulching to reduce evaporation; intended to eliminate or greatly reduce artificial irrigation.