

# Green Burials & Home Funerals

*Here's how to ensure your final resting place is earth friendly and priced right*

**By Nancy Smith**

A typical, no-frills funeral and burial in the United States costs from \$6,000 to \$10,000, and uses formaldehyde in embalming, and non-degradable steel caskets and concrete vaults placed shoulder to shoulder in burial plots in cemeteries that are often visually boring.

Burial in a green or natural cemetery, on

the other hand, can cost half as much, and embalming, metal caskets and concrete burial vaults are prohibited. Instead, biodegradable caskets, usually made of wood or cardboard, or burial shrouds of natural fibers are used. Green cemetery graves are marked only in natural ways, with the planting of a tree or shrub, or the placement of a flat indigenous stone, which may or may not be engraved. Burial locations are mapped with a GIS (geographic information system), so future generations can locate an ancestor's final resting place.

There are more than 200 green cemeteries in Great Britain, and the idea is beginning to catch on here in North America. Lisa Carlson is executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance in Hinesburg, Vermont, and author of *Caring for the*

Dead, which tackles the topic of funeral law state by state. She reports neither embalming, expensive caskets nor concrete vaults are required by law in any state. Bodies can be kept cool until burial rather than being embalmed, and cemeteries require vaults only to facilitate grass mowing.

According to Carlson, the leaders in the emerging green cemetery field in this country are Dr. Billy and Kimberley Campbell of Memorial Ecosystems, founded in 1996 in Westminster, South Carolina. Their idea is to use green cemeteries to preserve open space. You can be buried at the Campbells' first green cemetery, Ramsey Creek green cemetery, Ramsey Creek green Preserve, in Westminster, and visitors can walk on trails through 32 acres of mixed woodlands and open fields there.

In Florida, a green cemetery called Glenwood Memorial Preserve is being established to save a 320-acre family farm from development. And groups in several other states, including Colorado, California, New York, Washington and Wisconsin, have efforts under way to establish green cemeteries that center on land preservation. In

## Transformations

*Portion of this yew  
Is a man my grandsire knew  
Bosomed here at its foot:  
This branch may be his wife,  
A ruddy human life  
Now turned to a green shoot.*

*These grasses must be made  
Of her who often prayed,  
Last century, for repose;  
And the fair girl long ago  
Whom I often tried to know  
May be entering this rose*

*So, they are not underground,  
But as nerves and vein abound  
In the growths of upper air,  
And they feel the sun and rain,  
And the energy again  
That made them what they are.*

—Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)



MARY WOODSEN

The headstone, left, is on the first grave at Ramsey Creek Preserve, Westminster, South Carolina.

Canada, the Memorial Society of British Columbia also has a formally funded green-burial initiative under way.

The first burial at Ramsey Creek occurred in the fall of 1998, and to date, 17 more have taken place. Another 50 persons have purchased sites. A green casket burial there costs about \$2,500. Burial of cremated remains is only \$500; scattering of cremated remains is \$250. Stone grave markers and engraving are optional; the stones are \$25; engraving averages between \$125 and \$300. Caskets are not included. (For instructions on building your own casket, see Page XX.)

Dr. Campbell says people seem to want to be buried there because of the site's natural beauty, the lower cost and the land preservation effort. Bodies usually arrive for burial at Ramsey Creek via a local, independent funeral home, whose owner has agreed to hold them under refrigeration until delivery to the Preserve. The nature of any graveside ceremony is determined by the families. "Whatever spiritual bent you bring to the Preserve, our natural landscape is very healing," Kimberley Campbell says. "What we do is very simple, but there is something very, very special about the simplicity of it."

Sherrill Hughes buried her husband, Roland, in 2001 at Ramsey Creek. She says she knows without a doubt that was what he would have wanted. His body was placed in a simple pine box — a preference he had expressed — and buried under a dogwood tree; her gravesite is right next to his, and she says her children all want to be buried there, too. "Roland's funeral was so personal. In most funerals there's no emotion, but at Ramsey Creek, you can do what you want to do." She played his favorite songs — Dolly Parton's "I'll always love you" and George Jones' "He stopped loving her today" — and placed the first spade-full of dirt in his grave. Following her lead, their children shoveled too, "and before we knew it, the boys — my two sons-in-law and nephew — had nearly finished filling in the grave."

Mrs. Hughes, who lives in Atlanta, says she wouldn't describe herself or her husband as environmentalists. Rather, they always just tried to take care of what God had given them, "and that included the earth." She plans to move to the Westminster area soon, where most of her family already lives, and she'll build her own casket and

## Remember

If you use a conventional funeral home and cemetery, be aware that embalming, expensive caskets and concrete vaults generally are NOT required by law. Cemeteries may establish such requirements, but they also may waive them, or change the rules if they choose. So, if you want a simpler burial, ask around. You may find a funeral home and cemetery that will accommodate your preferences.

If you are thinking about handling a funeral yourself, you should know that most states clearly allow families to care for their own dead, according to Lisa Carlson, author of *Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love*. In a few states the statutes or regulations are unclear or negative in this regard; these states are: Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey and New York; for more details see *Caring for the Dead*, or contact Carlson at [www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org). If you don't hire a funeral director, here are some things you should know:

**Death Certificates:** A death certificate signed by a doctor stating the cause of death must be filed, usually in the county or district where death occurs, or where a body is found, or where a body is removed from a public conveyance or vehicle. States vary in the time required for filing the death certificate with the local registrar, but this must usually be accomplished before other permits are granted or before final disposition.

**Embalming:** No state requires routine embalming of all bodies. Refrigeration or dry ice can take the place of embalming in most instances. Special

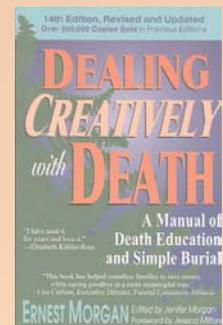
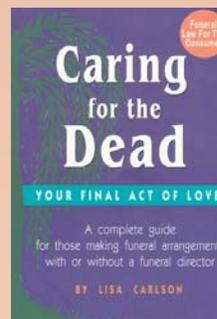
circumstances such as extended time between death and disposition can make it necessary under state law. Interstate transportation by a common carrier also may necessitate embalming, although most airlines will waive that requirement if there are religious objections.

**Burial permits:** In some states, when burial will be outside the county or town where death occurred, you will need an additional permit to inter (whether on private land or in a cemetery) from the local registrar in that area. The statutes and regulations of some states include a depth requirement; standard practice in many states places the top of the coffin at least three feet below the natural surface of the earth. A burial location should be 150 feet or more from a water supply and outside the easement for any utility or power lines.

**Moving a body:** Never move a body without a permit (or medical permission)! Most states require a permit for transportation or disposition. A death certificate must usually be completed first, and often a special permit-to-cremate is needed prior to cremation. Always call ahead

before moving a body, even if you have a permit. By calling first, you will be expected at the destination and proper arrangements will have been made to handle the body.

**Cremation:** A special permit-to-cremate may be needed; these are available from the local coroner or medical examiner, and a modest fee is usually charged. If the deceased did not sign a cremation authorization on the right forms prior to death, next-of-kin will be required to give the authorization at most crematories.



## Do It Yourself

help out as a volunteer at the Preserve.

Dr. Campbell says folks buried at the Preserve so far fit a range of descriptions, and the majority are *not* environmentalists — which is exciting to him. Going through a green burial process helps people get beyond the “nature as wallpaper” mentality, he explains. The only doctor of medicine in Westminster, he has a long-time interest in the environment (in 1986, he helped found the South Carolina Forest Watch, a group that monitors the well being of the state’s forests) and he has been dealing with death since his medical school days; his wife thinks it’s a reassuring combination to their patrons. She also says Atlanta’s suburban sprawl is fast encroaching on their area, so they feel a sense of urgency.

Dr. Campbell notes, “My idea is we need to link land conservation with ritual and with people in a very fundamental way. When the economy is not quite what it should be, money is a problem (for groups dedicated to land preservation), but if Mamma and Grandmamma are buried some place, you might look at it differently.”

Establishing the Ramsey Creek Preserve seemed simple, but it proved a daunting task, according to Kimberley Campbell. For one thing, the state cemetery board was legislatively disbanded in 1992, and as a consequence, determining which authorities to contact about the project proved a challenge.

To help build the site’s status as a nature preserve, an inventory of plants has been taken and continues to be updated, and Dr. Campbell says a “site appropriate” native plant, the smooth-leaved coneflower (*Echinacea laevigata*), is being planted on

some of the gravesites to take advantage of the disturbed soil. Several uncommon native plants also have been found to date, including the tripartite violet and the crested coral root.

A visitor’s center, staffed by Kimberley’s parents, sits near the entrance, and an old chapel has been moved onto the grounds to be restored for use by people of all faiths. Life histories of those buried at the site will be archived there.

The Campbells also have provided assistance to others interested in following their example, and Billy Campbell says he is willing to work with any entity with large land holdings that might want to set up a similar preserve — complete with ethical oversights in both financial and environmental areas. “We’re building a socially responsible for-profit business,” he says of Memorial Ecosystems.

Of the other green burial initiatives under way in the United States, the closest to being operational is the Glendale Memorial Nature Preserve near Glendale, Florida. It is owned by brothers John and Bill Wilkerson, and now can accept burials but not yet legally charge for them. John Wilkerson, the family’s spokesman, says that’s because he and his brother still are negotiating with the state of Florida over a \$50,000 nonrefundable cemetery application fee, plus other fees. In the interim, in lieu of a formal burial fee, donations were being accepted; as of early 2003, no burials had taken place.

The Glendale preserve was established, John Wilkerson reports, because he and his brother took their late father seriously when he said, “Boys, this is a beautiful piece of property. It would be a shame to turn it into

## Each year in the U.S., we bury:

- 827,060 gallons of embalming fluid, which includes formaldehyde
- 180,544,000 pounds of steel, in caskets
- 5,400,000 pounds of copper and bronze, in caskets
- 30 million board feet of hardwoods, including tropical woods, in caskets
- 3,272,000,000 pounds of reinforced concrete in vaults
- 28,000,000 pounds of steel in vaults

*Statistics compiled by Mary Woodsen, vice president of the Pre-Posthumous Society of Ithaca, New York, and a freelance science writer and staff science writer at Cornell University.*

a mobile home park.” The entire 350-acre farm, where the elder Wilkerson grew peanuts, corn and soybeans and his sons now grow chufa, a specialty wildlife seed crop, will be incorporated into the preserve.

In addition to providing grave sites, the Wilkersons make simple coffins from native woods, using an on-farm sawmill, and have gathered a selection of flat indigenous stones, which a local stonemason has agreed to engrave.

John says he and Bill handled their own parents’ burials, including making the coffins — pine for Dad; poplar for Mom — and digging the graves. Their father died in 1996 and their mother, who wanted her funeral and burial to be a simple affair “and never missed a chance to remind us of that,” died in 2000. The couple is buried in a little church cemetery that lies adjacent to the farm, on land donated earlier by the father to the church. Digging those graves was “a very powerful thing to do,” John says. “It really facilitated the grieving process.”

Dr. Campbell, who is on the Glendale Preserve’s board of directors but not involved financially in the project, has attended meetings between the Wilkersons and Florida state officials to help explain the memorial preserve idea. He says he thinks the \$50,000 cemetery application fee is “oppressive” and notes an Ohio group also trying to establish a memorial preserve is dealing with a similar situation. Such fees are designed to help ensure “perpetual care” for gravesites in a new cemetery, according to Carlson, but in the case of a green cemetery, traditional main-

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COURTESY, THE CAMPBELLS

## Special Website forum with experts

A featured forum on green burials and home funerals will be offered in April, May and June on the Mother Earth News Web site ([www.motherearthnews.com/xxxxxx](http://www.motherearthnews.com/xxxxxx)). Guest experts Lisa Carlson, Dr. Billy and Kimberley Campbell, John Wilkerson, Mary Woodsen and Jerri Lyons will answer your questions.

## Do It Yourself

tenance practices such as large-scale lawn mowing do not occur.

The rules at both Ramsey Creek and Glendale are simple: No embalming, no casket unless it is biodegradable, no vault and no stone that can be pushed over. Kimberley Campbell notes they advocate natural burial as the best choice and cremation as the second best because cremation uses energy and releases toxins into the environment. She adds natural burial really isn't a new idea, "It's thousands of years old, and the reason is, it a very natural, effective way to dispose of a loved one's remains."

And wouldn't it be wonderful to visit a loved one's gravesite located along a beautiful prairie trail, in a towering New England forest or other quiet place of extraordinary natural beauty? ☺

### For more information

**Funeral Consumers Alliance**, Lisa Carlson, P.O. Box 10, Hinesburg, VT 05461; (800) 765-0107; [www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org).

**Final Passages**, Jerri Lyons P.O. Box 1721, Sebastopol, CA 95473; (707) 824-0268; [www.finalpassages.org](http://www.finalpassages.org).

**Memorial Ecosystems, Inc.**, and Ramsey Creek Preserve: Dr. Billy and Kimberley Campbell, 113 Retreat St., Westminster, SC 29693; (864) 647-7798; Fax (864) 647-7796; Website: [www.memorialecosystems.com](http://www.memorialecosystems.com)

**Glendale Memorial Nature Preserve**: John and Bill Wilkerson, 297 Railroad Avenue, DeFuniak Springs, FL 32433; (850) 859-2141; [www.glendalenaturepreserve.org](http://www.glendalenaturepreserve.org)

**The North American Woodland Burial Society**, an information exchange: <http://woodlandburial.htmlplanet.com>  
**In Canada, the Memorial Society of British Columbia**, 212-1847 West Broadway, Vancouver, British Columbia V6J 1Y6; (604) 733-7705; [www.memorialsocietybc.org](http://www.memorialsocietybc.org)



COURTESY, JERRI LYONS

Family and friends of Mari, age 45, who died of breast cancer, decorate her casket.

## Home Funerals

Your mother is dying. You want to care for her yourself, at home, when death finally arrives rather than hiring a mortuary. She feels the same. Together, while there is still time, you decide to plan her service and burial. How do you begin?

Three books can help. They are *Caring for the Dead, Your final Act of Love*, by Lisa Carlson; *Guidebook for Creating Home Funerals* by Jerri Lyons; and *Dealing Creatively with Death, A Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial* by Ernest Morgan.

Carlson, executive director of the non-profit Funeral Consumers Alliance in Hinesburg, Vermont, has become a national spokesperson for the "do-it-yourself" funeral movement in the last few years, and she says such burials, especially on private land, appear to be on the rise. "There's no easy way to track it, but there seems to be an ongoing interest in family burial. It's being done quietly, but the number of inquiries on this topic at the Funeral Consumers Alliance is definitely increasing."

The trend is totally predictable,

she adds. "The generation that demanded natural childbirth in the '60s and '70s and recycling in the '90s is wanting green burials, including do-it-yourselfers, now."

Lyons is director of Final Passages, a seven-year-old not-for-profit organization in Sebastopol, California, and a "death midwife." Her goal with Final Passages is "to reintroduce the concept of funerals in the home as a part of family life and as a way to de-institutionalize death." Through this non-profit project, she provides information and education, and through her own for-profit company, Home and Family Funerals, she offers her death midwife services. She knows of several other death midwives in California and one in Maryland; others may be working quietly on their own in other areas.

Lyons has personally helped more than 200 California families handle their own funerals, and she has counseled many more across the country via the telephone. She says she believes the widespread practice of having the deceased person's body

## Do It Yourself



Mildred, age 86, wanted a home funeral, just like her folks back in Iowa, so her children obliged. Mildred's decorated casket rode to the crematory in the family's camper van.

whisked away at the time of death by funeral home personnel interrupts the normal grieving process and destroys the coherence families can achieve on their own. When the family handles its own funerals, they gain "better closure, a sense of empowerment and substantial economic savings."

Lyons' guidebook includes step-by-step instructions for such things as washing and dressing the body to "lie in honor," and handling transportation of the body home and/or to the place of disposition, which is either cremation or burial. The book also includes specific information on government paperwork required for home funerals in California.

Through *Final Passages*, Lyons presents periodic workshops about funeral options and about becoming death guides or death midwives like herself.

Most of the families Lyons has helped used cremation for disposition of the body. She also has participated in one "earth friendly" or green burial, in the Sebastopol Memorial Lawn Cemetery, an older, privately owned facility. The body

was not embalmed; the casket was cardboard and no vault was used; the dirt was simply mounded up on the grave, rather than being leveled as it is over a vault.

Lyons predicts green and home burials will increase if information about them becomes more widely available. "Most people in this country don't know they have the legal right to care for their own loved ones when they die," she says.

The organization's Web site includes interviews with people who have planned their own funerals and photographs of burials, along with a resource information.

Carlson cautions persons who choose to handle death privately to "take great care to follow all state and local regulations. The requirements are not complex, but failure to meet them can

Death midwife Jerri Lyons sits with Jasmine during Jasmine's three-day wake, held in a friend's home overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

lead to unpleasant situations and create a climate in which professionals become less willing to work with families."

In her book, she explains the precision needed in filling out a death certificate, required by every state, and she reports situations where special death certificates are required, including fetal deaths and those that require an autopsy. She notes that special circumstances, such as an extended time between death and disposition, may make embalming necessary, but refrigeration or dry ice can take the place of embalming in many instances. She also warns readers to "never move a

body without a permit or medical permission."

Home burials require an examination of local zoning ordinances, according to Carlson, "and for those with land in rural or semi-rural areas,



COURTESY, JERRI LYONS (2)