



The traditional way of letting our loved ones go can be a beautiful, peaceful time for those who remain.



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1673 York Street
Denver, Colorado 80206
303.322.7764
www.FeldmanMortuary.com

Dust to Dust: Eco-Friendly Natural Burials

By Terry Chriswell

Most of us don't like to consider death – ours nor our loved ones. We put off planning for “someday” until the cycle of life comes to a close for a loved one and we must arrange burials through our grief. Often, we let arrangements be handled by the local funeral home. But, a proactive decision made early may help us handle this time with some comfort that we are following the wishes of the deceased. In fact, forethought and self education that takes into account our loved one's wishes, affordability and the environment might be the wisest decision you will ever make.

Most of us are completely unaware that *modern* burials contribute to the decline of the environment. Some interesting facts about cremation and burials from *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* by environmental journalist Mark Harris:

- A typical 10-acre swatch of cemetery ground contains enough coffin wood to construct 40 houses; nearly 1,000 tons of casket steel; 20,000 tons of vault concrete; and enough toxic embalming fluid to fill a backyard swimming pool.
- The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) deems formaldehyde (used in embalming) as a potential occupational carcinogen and the funeral trade shows elevated levels of several different cancers; no Federal law requires embalming; the EPA regulates it as a hazardous waste yet the funeral industry routinely buries over three pounds of the formaldehyde-based ‘formalin’ in each body; the embalmed body's toxic cache is eventually released into the soil, where it can leach into groundwater.
- According to the National Funeral Directors Association, in 2012 the US cremation rate was 43.2% and mostly chosen to save land; however, carbon monoxide, radioactivity, fine soot, sulfur dioxide and metals, including mercury, are released into the atmosphere. Mercury is highly toxic (mostly known due to silver fillings), which is linked to brain and neurological damage in children; The New England Zero Mercury Campaign estimates that US crematories emit over 5,000 pounds every year.

A return to the *traditional* way of letting our loved ones go can be a beautiful, peaceful time with definitive closure for those that remain – and it doesn't have to be toxic to the environment. The Jewish burial culture is inherently green, says Jamie Sarche, Director of Outreach and Pre-Arranged Funeral Planning for Feldman Mortuary in Denver. Options include no chemicals or embalming, an all-wood casket with no nails and a biodegradable interior and shroud. “We came from the Earth, and we believe we go back into it with the utmost respect for the body and the Earth.” And, she says, most people don't know that a mortuary like Feldman is not just for those of the Jewish faith. Regardless

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of faith, if you prefer the “greener” services provided by a professional organization like Feldman, don’t be intimidated; reach out and ask. There are very few traditional burial services available in Colorado.

Imagine the *traditional* way our forefathers buried their loved ones: within 24-48 hours, with some refrigeration or ice to keep the body from decomposing too quickly; a basic casket made from biodegradable, readily-available, local wood or wrapped in a cotton cloth and placed in a hand-dug grave amidst a field of wildflowers, marked with the planting of a bush or the piling of fieldstones. Historically, these burials used significantly less resources, were inexpensive, natural and environmentally safe. Dust to dust. We can still have that today.

Luc Nadeau, owner of Nature’s Casket in Longmont, hand-makes simple caskets and ships them all over the country. He says his customers tell him about the empowerment they feel when they pick the casket, assemble it and sometimes paint it with beautiful designs. They feel the process is more meaningful and cathartic, and it honors their loved ones more than they could in a modern burial process. You are not required by law to buy the casket a funeral home offers you; in fact, the Funeral Rule (enforced by the Federal Trade Commission) stipulates that funeral homes are required to accept caskets from outside their establishments, without any upcharges or fees.

Laina Corazon has been trying to create a low-cost, low-impact natural cemetery for years in Colorado. Consistently stumped by neighbors, changing policy and money, the land she bought went into foreclosure. Her non-profit, “Prairie Wilderness Cemeteries,” needs 10+ acres and a “perpetual care fund” so that the land is maintained for proper use after she herself passes. The idea that on this land you can be laid to rest next to your beloved pet should interest many Coloradoans.

Because we all want a better world to leave our children, the importance of how and where you leave your loved ones can’t be emphasized enough. Evaluate your options well in advance for a burial that not only honors your loved ones, but honors the Earth as well. ■

Terry Chriswell is the publisher of Natural Awakenings.

Resources

- Green burials for all faiths & workshops on end of life planning: Feldman Mortuary, Jaime Sarche: 303-322-7764
- Homemade, local, natural caskets: Nature’s Casket, Luc Nadeau: 720-383-7613
- Do you have 10 acres for green burial use? Contact Prairie Wilderness Cemetery, Laina Corazon: 303-832-7074
- Natural Transitions magazine: home funeral information, workshops, educational consultation: Karen van Vuuren: 303-443-3418 or NaturalTransitions.org
- Ask your county officials about burial on your private land.



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Green or Natural Cemeteries:

- Evergreen Memorial Park in Evergreen
- Crestone Cemetery in Crestone

Books:

- *Grave Matters* by Mark Harris
- *Final Rights* by Joshua Slocum, executive director of Funeral Consumers Alliance, and Lisa Carlson, executive director of Funeral Ethics Organization

Funeral Planning:

- Green Burial Council Planning Guide: GreenBurialCouncil.org
- The Funeral Consumers Alliance: Funerals.org



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