



# green funerals



## what are they?

A green funeral offers an alternative to the traditional funeral ceremony and a more holistic and informal way of celebrating a loved one's death. The popularity of having a different type of ceremony has increased over the past few years and growing numbers of people are turning away from the black clothing and sombre funeral services that focus on grief, rather than celebrating the life of the deceased. Green funerals involve a burial rather than cremation. Woodland burial sites have grown in number dramatically over the past two decades and reflect the increasing demand for a way of returning the body to the earth and being more sustainable than the traditional service. The sites are run either by private companies or the local authority, and the land used can be a meadow or a wooded area. As a general rule, headstones are not permitted; however a wooden plaque or a stone can sometimes be placed in the ground to mark the grave, that could include the name of the deceased and the date of death. Policies differ between sites. At woodland burial sites, a tree, usually of your choice, can be planted to commemorate the deceased and the intention is that over the years, this will develop into a woodland area that nature will take care of, reducing the need for maintenance.

Coffins and shrouds are produced from biodegradable materials, therefore reducing pollution. Some sites don't even require a coffin (just a shroud), but you should always check first with your chosen site to see what their requirements are. It's not usual for a site to be consecrated; plots are available to anyone; and there may be an additional charge for digging the grave. You would need to check with the site to see if any extras, such as a biodegradable coffin and collection of the body are included. It's also worth remembering that most sites do not have an indoor area, therefore any service or ceremony will probably be held out in the open.

More and more people are thinking about their own funerals and how they would like to be remembered. With traditional funerals increasingly being perceived as having a negative environmental impact, plus the desire to break away from tradition and have something more personal, green funerals are definitely on the increase.

## what are the benefits?

**Environmental:** nowadays coffins can be made from materials that are beautiful and biodegradable too. In the UK each year, thousands of hardwood coffins are burned in crematoria, releasing a mix of chemicals into the atmosphere, not to mention all the wood that is wasted. Cardboard coffins are accepted by almost all crematoria and will require far less energy to burn than a hardwood coffin.

But in a country of over 60 million people who are all going to die at some point, think of the difference between 60 million cremations (an average cremation releases over 400kg of CO<sub>2</sub> and other pollutants), and 60 million trees planted, that absorb CO<sub>2</sub> and provide a habitat for wildlife.

There are many types of eco-coffin available - cardboard, papier maché, seagrass, wicker or bamboo. There's also the eco-pod, which is constructed from recycled paper. They're very light and are absorbed relatively quickly into the environment. Shrouds and any clothing must also be made of natural fibres like wool, cotton or linen. Bodies are not embalmed. Embalming makes the body slightly plumper and pinker, but involves draining the blood and replacing it with highly toxic formaldehyde.

**Financial:** a green funeral tends to be a lot cheaper than a conventional one, and could actually be free if you organise the ceremony yourself, and the burial is on your own land.

**Ceremony:** in an increasingly multicultural and secular society, green funeral services can be inclusive, for a group of people of various religions or none, and can be tailored to reflect the preferences of the deceased.



*Green funerals can be an informal celebration of the life of the deceased; here a group of friends carry a wooden coffin to a woodland burial site.*



### what can I do?

The first thing to do is to look at the Natural Death Centre website, or get a copy of the Natural Death Handbook or the Dead Good Funerals book, which cover any questions you could possibly have about green funerals. Contrary to what you might think, there are few legal requirements when disposing of a body in the UK. You are not required to have a hearse, use undertakers or have a member of the clergy present. The key requirements are that you have a death certificate that has been signed by a doctor and a certificate for burial or cremation from the Registrar of Deaths. Only when you have this certificate will a hospital or mortuary release a body. You can organise a funeral independent of any assistance from a funeral company, but it could be a distressing process and something you will want to have thought about well in advance. You'll need to consider the transportation of the body and who will carry the coffin and perform the service.

The next step is to decide on the location. You can choose a natural burial site like a woodland or a nature reserve. You can also have a burial on your own land if you have a large garden – but organising this can be complicated. There have been battles with local authorities to be able to do this, but those battles have been won, as long as the grave is not close to a



*You can choose the ceremony, music, readings and style to suit the deceased, and the natural setting will provide the perfect backdrop.*

watercourse. There are further implications with this option – for example, should you want to move house in the future, it could reduce the value of the property.

Another important factor to consider is the burial rights, how long they will run for and what happens once they've expired or the burial site is at full capacity. It's always a good idea to be clear about these with your chosen site.

Burial at sea is another legal option. A small number are carried out each year, but there are only a handful of locations in the UK where this is permitted and it's complex to organise. Sea burials are discouraged by the Department of the Environment however, because of the possibility of the body being washed up on the shore by the tides.



*Coffins can be made of a range of biodegradable materials, including FSC-certified timber, cardboard, strengthened papier maché, or wicker (above).*

### resources

- [lowimpact.org/green-funerals](http://lowimpact.org/green-funerals) for information, courses, links and books, including:
  - Lucinda Herring, *Reimagining Death*
  - Elizabeth Fournier, *Green Burial Guidedbook*
  - Wienrich & Speyer, *Natural Death Handbook*
- [naturaldeath.org.uk](http://naturaldeath.org.uk) – Natural Death Centre
- [greenfd.org.uk](http://greenfd.org.uk) – Association of Green Funeral Directors
- [beatree.com](http://beatree.com) – encouraging natural burials
- [iocf.org.uk](http://iocf.org.uk) – non-religious celebrants
- [goodfuneralguide.co.uk](http://goodfuneralguide.co.uk) – helping people get the funeral they want

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