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- Home and Garden

A Guide to Green Burials

By Reader's Digest Editors



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You recycle, drive a hybrid, eat vegetarian, and take your own bag to the grocery store—but have you thought about how your death will affect the planet? In all seriousness, if you want to continue to make a positive impact on the environment after you're gone, consider how your remains will be handled.

Plus: [13 Things the Funeral Director Won't Tell You](#)

Traditional burial and cremation methods take a serious toll on the environment. Cemeteries use up valuable water on their lush lawns, as well as liberally spray pesticides, and use pollution-producing lawn mowers to keep things looking neat and tidy.

Embalming fluids contain toxins that can leak into the ground. Also, exposure to the formaldehyde in embalming fluids raises a mortician's risk of dying from myeloid leukemia, according to a 2008 study in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*. Americans also bury at least 1 million tons of steel caskets each year, which do not degrade. Then there's the fact that people buried in coffins take up large amounts of land for all eternity.

Cremation isn't much better. It releases pollutants such as nitrous oxide and mercury from dental fillings into the air. Crematories are not regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Fortunately, there are now alternatives. More and more companies are offering green burials or other environmentally sound ways to leave life. For starters, you can now opt to forgo embalming, or request nontoxic embalming fluid. You can also make sure you are buried in a biodegradable container made from natural materials, such as bamboo, wicker, willow, or just a simple shroud.

You might also want to be buried without a marker out in nature, where dust can truly return to dust.

Another option is to have yourself turned into a "reef ball" that provides habitat for fish. To make a reef ball, Eternal Reefs mixes cremated remains with environmentally-friendly concrete and shapes them into a basketball-size "pearl." The pearl is then attached to a beehive-shaped concrete reef. Entire families and even pets can become a reef together. Eternal Reefs has already installed over 1,500 Memorial Reefs in 20 permitted locations off the coasts of Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Maryland, New Jersey, Texas and Virginia, substantially increasing the ocean's diminishing reef systems.

Another upside is that green burials tend to be cheaper, because you aren't paying for embalming or expensive caskets.

"Baby boomers who define themselves as environmentalists don't want to go out with a final act of pollution," says Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council, headquartered in Santa Fe, New Mexico. "A lot of people find solace in returning to the earth naturally."

Plus: [The Reader's Digest Version of Going Green](#)

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