

YourLife

GUIDE TO **GREEN LIVING**

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IS THE
NEW
SEXY**

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ORGANIC
BERRIES
HAVE MORE
ANTIOXIDANTS

**GET
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AMERICA'S
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BACK TO THE EARTH

Green funerals trend provides a bounty of eco-conscious alternatives

By Janet Kornblum for USA TODAY

Ray Karno does not like waste. When food is trashed, it drives him crazy. When natural resources are tossed out, he loathes it. And when his heart stops beating and his time is up, he wants to make very sure that his own body is not squandered.

"If there are three words that I live my life by, it's that I hate waste. I can't stand it," Karno says.



That's why Karno, a 53-year-old salesman from Oakland, Calif., wants to skip the cement burial vault many cemeteries use, forgo the traditional coffin, and instead have his unembalmed, 190-pound body wrapped in a biodegradable shroud and planted directly into the ground where it will decay and become plant food.

In other words, Karno wants to have what is now being dubbed a green, or natural, burial.

Green fever isn't just affecting Americans' lives. It's following us to our graves.

While it is nearly impossible to measure the precise numbers of eco-burials, especially since the term means different things to different people, the number of providers of green-related disposal services (including funeral homes, product manufacturers, and cremation disposition programs) is growing.

Three years ago there were a dozen providers. Today there are nearly 300 representing 40 states and five provinces in Canada, says Joe Sehee, founder and executive director of the Green Burial Council, a non-profit organization based in Santa Fe that was established to set standards for and promote eco-burials.

Many people are just discovering that a green burial is even an option.

Take Karno. He had wanted one

ever since he was a kid and watched his family pets buried in the backyard, with his parents explaining that it completed the "circle of life," he says.

"The animal goes back into the ground and plants take the nutrients. I have always thought that this is what I wanted," Karno says. "I wanted to be buried just like my animals were buried and not be wasted."

But he didn't think it was possible. Someone—he can't remember who—told him it was illegal for humans to be buried without first being embalmed.

In reality, burial without embalming is perfectly legal. Still, many Americans mistakenly believe that embalming, as well as cement vaults, are required by law, Sehee says. "There are no state laws anywhere" that require embalming, cement vaults, or even coffins, Sehee says.

Cemeteries themselves sometimes require vaults and liners, which keep the grounds smooth, Sehee says. But there are a number of new kinds of cemeteries cropping up that ban embalming and non-biodegradable coffins. Beyond that, many traditional cemeteries and crematoriums are offering green options, such as areas set aside specifically for green burials and cremation containers that are less harmful to the environment.

When Karno found out he could

go green, "I went, 'Oh my God. This is what I've always dreamt of.' I always thought this should exist."

The idea seems to be catching on.

Honey Leveen, an insurance saleswoman from Houston, also learned about green burials through the media.

Actually, her first exposure to the concept came from a now-well-known episode of the TV show *Six Feet Under*. Back in 1995, when the show depicted a green burial, it was a new concept to many viewers.

Leveen then read about it in her local paper and immediately decided it was for her. "It's a duh," she says. "There's only logic to it. Why would someone want to be embalmed? What a waste of time and contaminating, bad chemicals. Your legacy could [instead] be to feed the worms and be generative."

At 58 and in "outstanding health," Leveen isn't planning on departing any time soon. But she's glad she's prepared.

She's thought a lot about her funeral party: it will be on the water—Leveen is a boatswain with the Houston Canoe Club.

But she doesn't care if her friends actually go to her burial site, an hour-and-a-half hike into the woods. She'll be buried in a shroud or maybe her favorite comforter.

"It's really not that important to me," she says. "It's really more important that I'm not contaminating the earth any more, that I'm not pumping these horrible embalming chemicals (into the ground). Maybe I will decompose and it helps the trees grow. I think that's pretty cool," Leveen says.

"A lot of people find solace in this notion of having their bodies integrated into the ecosystem, getting in sync with the natural process of life and death and decay and rebirth," Sehee says.

While there is no one definition for so-called green or natural burials, Sehee's organization defines it broadly as "a way of caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact that furthers legitimate ecological aims such as the conservation of natural resources, reduction of carbon emissions, protection of worker health, and the restoration and/or preservation of habitat."

For most, that means burying people, sans embalming, in biodegrad-



able containers such as plain pine coffins or shrouds and then leaving the land in as natural a state as possible.

While people like Leveen and Karno would never opt for cremation because of the pollution it creates, others think cremation is a good choice because it does not use land.

For some, the way their body will be disposed of after death is determined by religion and tradition. Some traditions require cremation, for instance, while others forbid it.

"We don't want green burials to diminish conventional offerings," Sehee says. "We don't want anyone to feel bad about opting for cremation or embalming. But we do want to show them there's a way to green up any of those choices."

For instance, bodies can be embalmed with more natural chemicals than formaldehyde, and cremations, while they necessarily emit some carbon into the atmosphere, can use shrouds or boxes that burn without much pollution.

Cremated remains also can be used to help the environment.

That's the goal of Eternal Reefs, a company based in Decatur, Ga. that takes cremated remains and incorporates them into cement balls that are placed on the bottom of the ocean to become reefs.

The reefs become badly needed habitat for fish, says George Frankel, CEO of Eternal Reefs.

Because friends and family often work on creating the cement ball itself, putting handprints in the wet cement, writing on it, or embedding it with environmentally-safe objects, they become "vested in the marine environment," Frankel says.

"They're not going to hear another story about a ship running aground or oil spilling in the ocean and not have a very visceral personal reaction that says to them this could be where my mom is," he says. "So we are building a whole grassroots stewardship with regards to helping preserve the marine environment."

So far, his company has created more than 1,200 reefs containing the remains of over 1,500 individuals. (Some families choose to put more than one person's remains in each ball.)

The balls have been planted with permission and the blessing of a host of federal, state, and local regulatory agencies, from the South Padre Islands in Texas to Atlantic City, N.J.

And it's not just an Eternal Reefs burial that tends to involve friends and family members more directly.

Because there's no embalming, preparing for the body for a green burial can be largely performed by private parties—sometimes at home. And loved ones also can participate in the burial itself.

While green burials do not always mean having a home funeral, they offer that option, says Char Barrett, founder of A Sacred Moment, a company based in Everett, Wash. that provides home funeral planning and related services.

Instead of an embalmed body, a home funeral bathes and dresses the body and then uses dry ice to lay the body out in honor before transportation to the burial ground.

"Home funerals are a very natural approach to death," Barrett says. "We are not sanitizing it. We are not invading the body with chemicals like the embalming

process does. We are simply having the naturalness of the body and the naturalness of the earth meet each other."

In a sense, Barrett says, it is a throwback.

"It is obviously the way we used to care for our dead before the real establishment of the funeral home and the funeral industry in our culture," Barrett says. Whether it's the natural or environmental aspect that draws people, Barrett and others believe the number of eco-burials is only going to increase.

"It is not something that is a passing fad," Barrett says. "I definitely see it as something that is going to be more and more desired by families, especially as people learn that it's an option. People are becoming more conscious about the Earth and the impact that our actions have on the Earth."

And the 79 million or so Baby Boomers are especially likely to be interested, says Karen Jones, author of *Death for Beginners: Your No-Nonsense, Money-Saving Guide to Planning for the Inevitable*—and a boomer herself.

Not only are boomers "more aware of how we're damaging the planet" than previous generations. But as a generation, "we like to do things differently or on our own terms," Jones says. "I think an alternative



"A lot of people find solace in this notion of having their bodies integrated into the eco-system, getting in sync with the natural process of life and death and decay and rebirth."



"People are able to be more involved in their end-of-life rituals in a way that authentically represents their core values."

green burial is something that's very intriguing to people."

The funeral industry is responding, albeit slowly, says Mark Duffey, CEO of Everest, a Houston-based, nationwide funeral planning and concierge service.

"For years, people have been moving toward cremation because they thought of that as the green option that didn't use up land, Duffey says. The cremation rate for Americans is now about 33 percent, he says.

While numbers for green funerals are probably still under 3 percent, he predicts they will grow as people realize they have an environmentally friendly option.

"The whole issue of simplicity and back to nature and a more earth-friendly environment—that is going to grow," Duffey says. "It's just [a question of] how fast. The individuals that would consider a green funeral now are the same people who would consider cremation before."

In Marin, Calif., where the environmental community is especially strong, Forever Fernwood, a 121-year-old crematorium, funeral home, and mortuary decided to add a green section in 2004.

Unlike the traditional cemetery, the green section does not have headstones. People can mark graves with rocks or small boulders with engraved names, but there is no polished granite.

"As you come into the green part of the cemetery, you'll see the open ground with rocks scattered around," says cemetery manager Kathy Curry. You're not going to see rows and rows of headstones. You won't see a lot of flowers."

The green section, where embalming, grave liners, vaults, and metal caskets are forbidden, is 32 acres. In the last seven years, about 200 people—from all over the state and sometimes outside of California, have been buried there. Currently, there's room for about 10,000 more graves.

Curry sees interest growing: "A lot of people either don't know that it's available or don't understand that it's actually legal. As people are learning about it, more people are interested."

While they're often drawn to green burial for environmental reasons, people who choose it also "tend to be more involved in process of burying their loved one," Curry says. "All graves are dug by hand and families often choose to participate."

Sehee says that's a good thing. "People are able to be more involved in their end-of-life rituals in a way that authentically represents their core values—and that hasn't been possible for a long time.

"The funeral industry is having to let go," Sehee says. "Cremation rates have been rising because Americans have seen that as their only way around conventional funeral service. Green burial actually invites people to participate fully, and I think that's a good thing.

"When we take a walk in the woods and see examples of decay and regeneration side by side, it soothes us. It's the essence of ... ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Now that Americans are realizing this is an option, they are really drawn in. It's allowing people to really embrace their mortality." ■