

## Greener burial

Beneath untold acres of chemically and mechanically manicured cemetery land, we in the US deposit annually over thirty million board feet of hardwood and over 100,000 tons of steel, copper, and bronze, all of which are used in the construction of caskets. We also inter 800,000 gallons of embalming fluid, as well as over 1.6million tons of reinforced concrete in the form of burial vaults into which caskets are themselves encased

If this is a concern for you, the most ecological method of body disposition is green burial. There are commercial green burial cemeteries that are designated by the Green Burial Council. Its website lists the green burial providers. There is one in the Roanoke Valley, one in Lexington, and one near Harrisonburg. These cemeteries do not allow embalmed bodies. They require biodegradable containers or shrouds, and allow markers that are either wood or field stone which blend in with the natural surroundings. Burial in one of these cemeteries costs about the same amount as burial in a conventional cemetery except that the green cemeteries do not require a vault, grave liner, or outer container. There still is the cost of the grave site, opening and closing the grave, and a marker (if desired).

Conventional cemeteries often allow for greener options. It is important to check with the cemetery beforehand, but many allow burial using a cremation container – usually a cardboard box, or no container at all. They do require a vault or outer burial container, but the body can be placed directly in this. Cemeteries accommodate Jews and Muslims by installing the grave liner over the body, open at the bottom side so the body is exposed to the dirt which allows for swifter decomposition and return to the earth. The top of the cement vault keeps the ground from settling so grass can be mowed easily with a lawn tractor. People with no such religious restrictions can still request the same type of burial.

Another choice is home burial. In rural Virginia, there are few restrictions concerning burial and families who have a few acres or more may want to consider this option. A good place to start is at [www.municode.com/library](http://www.municode.com/library) where you can see if there are any restrictions in the county. Most counties have no restrictions. Virginia law requires that a burial site be disclosed when the property is sold and that relatives of the buried have rights in perpetuity to visit the grave at a mutually agreed upon time. It is sensible to locate the grave at least 150 feet from a water source. Burial between 3-4 feet below the surface is deep enough to deter wild animals and where aerobic bacteria can hasten the decomposition. The body need not be encased in anything more than a sheet or shroud. Biodegradable caskets are available online.

Green burial is the most ecologically friendly body disposal available in Virginia. Many people think that designation belongs to cremation. However, cremation leaves a large carbon footprint with greenhouse gas emissions, poison gas emissions, vaporized mercury emissions (from volatilized dental amalgam), as well as fossil fuel consumption from the burning of oil and natural gas to heat cremation retorts. It is better than conventional burial, but green burial is better for our planet.