

— FIELD GUIDE · RETURN TO SOIL

What Is Conservation Burial?

Your body protects land permanently. Not metaphorically.

There are hundreds of natural burial cemeteries in the United States. Most are good: no embalming, no vault, biodegradable containers, a simpler return to earth. But only a handful do the thing that makes conservation burial a category of its own. They protect land permanently, through legally binding conservation easements that ensure the ground above you can never be developed, paved, or sold off.

That distinction — between natural burial and conservation burial — is the most important and least understood divide in green deathcare. Natural burial is a method. Conservation burial is a method that is also a land-preservation strategy. One returns your body to the soil. The other returns your body to the soil *and* takes acres of threatened habitat out of the development pipeline for good. This is not a marketing claim. It is a legal structure.

The Conservation Easement

A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a qualified land trust, a nonprofit whose mission is land preservation. The agreement permanently restricts development on a defined parcel. Once recorded, it runs with the deed and binds every future owner, in perpetuity: the land cannot be subdivided, built on, clear-cut, mined, or converted to intensive agriculture. Ever. The land trust holds the right to enforce it.

A conservation burial ground applies that tool to the funeral trade. The operator works with a land trust to place an easement over the burial ground and its buffer, and the fees families pay for plots fund acquisition, restoration, and the endowment that pays for long-term stewardship. The result is that when you are buried in a conservation cemetery, the land

above you is protected from development for as long as American property law exists. The burial is not only an ecological act. It is a conservation act.

The Certification Levels

The Green Burial Council certifies cemeteries at three levels: **Hybrid** (a conventional cemetery with a green section), **Natural** (a dedicated natural burial ground), and **Conservation** — the highest, which requires a permanent conservation easement and a partnership with an established land trust. Only a small number of grounds hold that top certification.

The first true conservation burial ground in the United States opened in South Carolina in 1998, built on the insight that even a fraction of what Americans spend on funerals, redirected toward land, could protect thousands of acres. A small number of certified conservation grounds now operate across the Southeast, Midwest, and Pacific Northwest, protecting habitats as varied as Appalachian woodland, longleaf pine savanna, and oak grassland. Several accept whole-body burial, cremated remains, and even human-composted soil, bridging multiple green methods on protected land.

Why So Few Exist

If conservation burial is such a good idea, why are certified grounds still rare? **Land is expensive**, and most of these grounds are funded by fees, donations, and grants rather than venture money. **Easements take time** — negotiating one means legal work, ecological assessment, baseline documentation, and endowment funding, often one to three years. **The trade is slow to change**, because conservation burial runs on a different model from conventional cemeteries: no perpetual-care lawns, no vault or monument sales. And **awareness is low**: most people who say they want a “green” funeral are picturing “no embalming,” not “my burial funds a permanent easement.”

Conservation Burial vs. Natural Burial

DIMENSION	NATURAL BURIAL	CONSERVATION BURIAL
Embalming	not allowed	not allowed
Vault	not required	not required
Container	biodegradable	biodegradable

Markers	natural materials	natural materials
Conservation easement	not required	required, permanent
Land trust partnership	not required	required
Land protection	depends on the owner	permanent

The experience of being buried is nearly identical. What differs is what happens to the land above you over the next hundred, five hundred, or thousand years.

The Cost, in Plain Terms

Conservation burial is generally cheaper than a conventional funeral and comparable to natural burial elsewhere. The premium over basic natural burial is usually modest, and it buys permanent land protection. Whether that premium is worth it depends on how much the conservation story matters to you; for many families, it is the single most compelling reason to choose a specific site.

How to Plan One

Find your cemetery. Start with the Green Burial Council's directory of certified conservation grounds. If none is near you, a certified natural cemetery is the next best option, or check whether a conservation ground is in development in your region. **Contact it directly** — each has its own process and available plots, and visiting in person is worth it, as the visit often clarifies the decision. **Choose a biodegradable container** — plain wood, wicker, willow, bamboo, mushroom coffin, shroud, or none where permitted. And **communicate your wishes**: document what you want and make sure your family and executor know, because the best plan fails if no one knows about it.

The Bigger Picture

Conservation burial is the only disposition method that creates a permanent, legally enforceable, ecologically measurable benefit beyond the individual burial. Natural burial is gentle. Composting produces soil. Tree urns grow a single tree. Conservation burial protects an entire ecosystem, with a legal instrument that survives every future owner of the land. It is also the smallest segment of the green burial market, and every burial in a conservation cemetery makes the next one more likely.

A NOTE ON THIS GUIDE

This guide is for general information and reflects conditions as of 2026. Legal status, availability, and costs change over time; confirm current details before making arrangements. Nothing here is legal, medical, or financial advice.