

— FIELD GUIDE · RETURN TO SOIL

Green Burial 101

No embalming, no vault, no metal. What burial looks like with everything the industry added stripped away.

For most of human history, burial meant putting a body in the ground. A shroud, maybe. A wooden box, if the family could afford one. The grave was dug by hand, the body decomposed, and the earth absorbed what remained while life continued above it.

The modern American funeral — embalming, a steel or hardwood casket, a concrete vault, a lawn maintained in perpetuity — is an invention of the mid-nineteenth century, industrialised into a large business by the mid-twentieth. It is an aberration in the history of burial, not a tradition. It became the default not because it served the dead or the living especially well, but because it served the economics of the funeral trade extremely well.

Green burial is not a new idea. It is the original idea, with one addition: intention. A green burial makes a conscious choice to decline embalming, the vault, and the sealed casket, and to let the body return to the soil on the same terms every organism has used since the first creature died on land. It is not a rejection of care for the dead. It is a different form of care, one that trusts biology over chemistry and simplicity over spectacle.

What Green Burial Actually Means

The Green Burial Council defines it by what it leaves out.

NO EMBALMING

The body is not injected with preservative fluid, which otherwise leaches into the soil as the casket degrades. Refrigeration or dry ice preserves the body between death and burial instead, which covers the planning window for most funerals. An important legal point: embalming is almost never required by law, and the FTC Funeral Rule specifically prohibits funeral homes from telling families it is required when it is not.

NO VAULT OR GRAVE LINER

Conventional cemeteries require a sealed concrete or metal container around the casket, ostensibly to stop the ground settling. The real purpose is easier lawn maintenance and an additional product to sell. Green cemeteries do not require them; the ground settles naturally, and the landscape is kept as meadow or woodland.

NO METAL OR NON-BIODEGRADABLE MATERIALS

The container must be fully biodegradable. That rules out metal caskets, metal hardware, lacquered wood, and synthetic fabrics, and allows plain wood, woven willow, bamboo, or seagrass, mushroom coffins, simple cardboard, natural-fibre shrouds, or no container at all where permitted.

NO CONVENTIONAL MARKERS

Most green cemeteries prohibit polished granite and bronze. Graves are marked with native fieldstone, engraved rock, planted trees or shrubs, or GPS coordinates. The goal is a landscape that reads as habitat, not as a cemetery.

The Cemetery Landscape

Natural burial cemeteries fall into three types, matching the Green Burial Council's certification levels. **Hybrid** cemeteries are conventional grounds with a designated green section — the most common entry point, though the green section may be small. **Natural** cemeteries follow green practices throughout, with no embalming, vaults, or conventional markers anywhere. **Conservation** cemeteries are the highest level, requiring a permanent easement held by a land trust; only a handful exist.

The Cost, in Plain Terms

Green burial is, on average, meaningfully cheaper than a conventional funeral, because of what you are not buying: no embalming, no metal casket, no vault, and minimal marker. The range is wide and depends mostly on the container — a shroud burial at a modest natural cemetery sits at the low end, a mushroom coffin at a conservation ground near the high end. The casket is where the difference is starkest: a simple pine or woven box costs a fraction of a conventional metal casket, which can exceed the price of a used car.

Your Legal Rights

The FTC Funeral Rule applies to every funeral home in the country. It gives you the right to buy a casket from any source — online, a third-party retailer, or a carpenter — and the funeral home must accept it without a handling fee. It gives you the right to an itemised price

list before any discussion of arrangements. And it requires your explicit consent before embalming.

Home funerals. In most states, families have the legal right to care for their own dead: to wash and dress the body, transport it, and in some places bury it on private land, subject to local rules. A funeral director is not legally required for most deaths in most states. Families have more authority over the care of their dead than most people realise.

What to Expect

The body is kept cool rather than embalmed; the family may wash and dress it themselves and place it in the chosen container. The grave is usually shallower than a conventional grave, since there is no vault, and is often already open when the family arrives. Without a mechanical device, the body is lowered by hand, on straps or ropes — one of the most frequently cited emotional elements of green burial. Families are often invited to shovel earth back in; the sound of earth on wood or cloth is, for many people, the hardest moment, and often the most healing. Over the following months the grave settles and the landscape naturalises until it is indistinguishable from the ground around it, which is the point.

The Environmental Case

Green burial avoids the resource inputs that make conventional burial costly and returns nutrients to the soil rather than sealing them away: no embalming fluid, no manufactured and shipped casket, no concrete vault, no irrigated and mown lawn. The honest caveat, and it is one we make often: careful comparisons find conventional burial and cremation closer in impact than most people assume, and the difference turns heavily on how you weigh cemetery land. Green burial, which cuts or removes the maintenance burden, shifts that calculation decisively in burial's favour.

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.