FIELD GUIDE · RETURN TO SOIL

# A Complete Guide to Human Composting

*What it is, where it is legal, and what the body becomes.*

A human body is roughly a hundred pounds of organic matter: carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, water, and trace minerals, in concentrations any soil scientist would recognise as excellent feedstock. For most of American history, the default has been to spend a great deal of money preventing this material from doing anything useful — embalm it, seal it in a steel box, lower the box into a concrete vault, and maintain a lawn over it in perpetuity.

Human composting, formally called **natural organic reduction (NOR)**, is the practice of letting a body do what biology already intends. Under controlled conditions of heat, moisture, oxygen, and microbial activity, a body becomes roughly a cubic yard of clean, nutrient-rich soil in about ten weeks. No fire, no chemicals, no permanent infrastructure. Just biology, accelerated.

Washington legalised the process in 2019, the first jurisdiction in the world to do so. As of 2026, fourteen US states allow it, and the number is growing.

## The Biology

The science is not new. It is the science of every forest floor, every backyard compost pile, every rotting log — scaled and controlled for a human body. Decomposition is driven by heat-loving microbes whose activity generates high, sustained warmth, hot enough to break down soft tissue and destroy pathogens, viruses, and pharmaceutical residues. What remains is humus: the dark, crumbly, earthy-smelling material gardeners buy by the bag.

PLACEMENT

The body, unembalmed and either undressed or in natural-fibre clothing, is placed inside a vessel with wood chips, alfalfa, and straw. These provide the carbon microbes need to balance the nitrogen in the body. The ratio matters: too much nitrogen and the vessel sours; too much carbon and decomposition stalls.

#### THE ACTIVE PHASE

Within a day or two, microbial activity raises the temperature inside the vessel. This is not applied heat — it is warmth generated by billions of organisms consuming organic matter. Temperature is monitored throughout; airflow and turning are adjusted to keep it in range. Sustained warmth over several weeks is what ensures pathogens are destroyed and soft tissue fully breaks down.

#### TURNING AND BONE PROCESSING

The vessel is periodically rotated to introduce oxygen and redistribute moisture; decomposition with oxygen is faster, more complete, and far less odorous. Bones and teeth do not fully break down. Once the soft tissue is gone, the remaining fragments are dried and processed into fine particles — much as after cremation, but with no fire — and returned to the soil.

#### CURING AND YIELD

The finished material is cured for several more weeks. Residual activity slows, the material stabilises, the pH settles, and the result is tested before release. One body produces roughly a cubic yard of soil, enough to fill the bed of a pickup truck.

## Where It Is Legal

As of 2026, fourteen states have legalised natural organic reduction: Washington (2019, the first), Colorado, Oregon, and Vermont (2021), California and New York (2022), Nevada, Arizona, Maryland, and Delaware (2023), Minnesota and Maine (2024), and Georgia and New Jersey (2025). Legislation is moving through roughly fifteen more states, including Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, and Virginia.

One thing worth knowing: the legal state does not have to be the state where the person died. Providers serve families in every US state through transport partnerships with local funeral homes. Someone can die in one state, be composted in another where it is legal, and have the soil returned. The logistics are well established.

## The Cost, in Plain Terms

Human composting sits in the middle of the range of disposition options — more than a bare cremation, and well below a conventional funeral. It produces a usable output and eliminates the need for a plot, a vault, a headstone, and perpetual maintenance, which is what pushes conventional burial much higher. The environmental return and the tangible result — soil you can hold, scatter, or plant in — are what justify it for the people who choose it.

## The Environmental Case

The argument rests on three points. It avoids the inputs of conventional burial: no embalming fluid in the ground, no manufactured and shipped casket, no concrete vault, no irrigated and mown lawn. It avoids the emissions of flame cremation, which burns fossil fuel for hours and releases mercury from dental fillings. And it produces a genuine give-back: a cubic yard of carbon- and nutrient-rich soil.

A note on honesty, because it is the whole point of how we grade things. The claim that composting "saves about a ton of carbon" is relative, not absolute — it compares composting to the conventional alternative, not to nothing. And the process itself gives off some greenhouse gases, including methane and nitrous oxide from microbial activity. The net benefit is real, but it is not as tidy as the marketing suggests. There is no zero-impact way to handle a body. Composting is among the lowest-impact options available, and the only one that returns usable material to the living world — but it is not carbon-neutral in absolute terms.

## What Happens to the Soil

Once the process is complete and the material has passed testing, it is classified as soil, not human remains, and there is no legal restriction on its use in states where the process is legal. Families can **take it home** and use it in gardens, yards, or on private land; **donate it** to conservation or land-restoration projects; or **split it**, some for a garden, some for a relative's property, some donated.

The emotional reality is worth naming: a cubic yard is a lot of soil, nothing like receiving a small urn. Some families find the abundance moving, a fuller material reality of the person. Others find the volume difficult to manage. Both responses are normal, and facilities will hold soil for weeks while families decide.

## What Cannot Be Composted

Exclusions vary by state, but generally: bodies with radioactive implants or recent radioactive treatment may be excluded or delayed; certain infectious diseases, prion diseases such as CJD in particular, are excluded because prions survive the process; pacemakers and battery-powered implants must be removed beforehand. Most metal orthopaedic implants can remain and are recovered and recycled after decomposition. Embalming is unnecessary and introduces chemicals into the system, so it is discouraged.

## The Religious Landscape

Human composting has drawn organised opposition from the Catholic Church in several states, where bishops have argued the process does not treat the body with the dignity Catholic teaching requires, and that position has shaped some legislative votes. Other traditions have responded variously: some Jewish authorities read it as consistent with "dust to dust," Islamic scholars have not reached consensus, and traditions that already accept cremation have generally not objected. If religious compatibility matters to your decision, speak with a leader in your own tradition; the theological questions are genuinely complex.

## What a Family Experiences

A local funeral director prepares the body — no embalming, natural-fibre clothing or a shroud — and arranges transport to a facility; crossing state lines is routine and legal. The body is placed in the vessel with organic material; some facilities welcome families to be present, others handle this privately. The active phase runs about a month to six weeks, with curing adding several more, so from placement to soil expect roughly eight to twelve weeks. Families are notified when the soil is ready to be collected, shipped, or donated. No ceremony is required at any step, but there is room for one at every step.

---

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.