



# Ask the Undertaker

By Ryan Helfenbein

Greening is good. Not just for the environment, but especially this time of year. The green tree, evergreens placed on the railings, green suits of Santa's little elves. And the undertaking business has not escaped the trend this time of year or year-round.

Undertakers are ready to meet the growing demand for "green burials." This all-natural burial option — my dad calls it "cowboy burial" — that does not require preservation using chemicals or an outer burial container or even a monument. This relatively new method of burial entails use of an eco-friendly casket in a specialized cemetery or in a designated section of a traditional cemetery. Green burials provide a service that truly mimics customs of our ancestors. And it has caught the attention of baby boomers.

Some of you may wonder if embalming is necessary and if not, then must burial occur within 24 hours? Not true. Believe it or not, through the use of dry ice or refrigeration, funeral providers can delay the services until it is better suited for the family, typically three or four days. In the state of Maryland, there is no law that requires embalming.

Then why you ask, haven't we heard a lot more about green burial? A recent funeral industry magazine has addressed this very question. It pointed out that the average run-of-the-mill funeral director today simply does not understand it and is reluctant to change. Their grandpa never ran a funeral home of

fering it, so why should they? In spite of this, green burial is growing in popularity, as we have gone from five green burial cemeteries just six years ago to over 15 in the U.S. today.

Another roadblock to consumer education about green burial is not just resistance in the industry but confusion. When I discussed green burials recently with a Baltimore funeral director, he explained that his firm offers a green burial service. He continued by explaining there was no embalming, the family purchases an eco-friendly casket and that is then placed in an unsealed concrete liner for burial in a traditional cemetery. OK, now this is a partially green burial, but not a true green burial.

Green Burial, natural burial, or cowboy burial, whichever you prefer, does not include an outer enclosure. It is the placement of an eco-friendly casket directly into the earth. Some may even choose to skip the casket and use shrouds. (Yes, we undertakers are bringing back some ancient customs.) In the specialized cemeteries that conduct green burials, graves are dug by hand, not with modern machinery. The caskets are lowered with the use of rope, not a steel lowering device. The graves are then hand-shoveled and closed, often with the family assisting. No backhoe involved. Traditional monuments will not be found in a green burial cemetery. In some cases, natural elements, such as trees or rocks are used to mark the location of a loved one's interment. In a tip of the hat to modern technology, families are given the GPS coordinates of the location, marked or not.

Green burial was first implemented in the United Kingdom. The very first green burial cemetery started in 1993 and now there are more than 200 in the U.K. The first green burial cemetery in the US was opened in South Carolina in 1998. Today, we see this becoming very popular along the East Coast and is offered even right here in Annapolis.

Maryland Green Burial is a good source of information for those who want to learn more about cemeteries in the area providing this service. Reach it at [www.mdgreenburial.com](http://www.mdgreenburial.com)

I'd like to end this year's edition of "Ask the Undertaker" with a "thank-you" to the readers of this column. It has been a pleasure meeting some of you in person, having the opportunity to answer some of your questions through the column and bring light to what has always been a dark topic. In the upcoming year, I plan to cover questions such as, "What steps are involved with pre-planning," "How can one be buried at sea" and the ever-so-popular topic of cremation. I welcome other suggestion you may have.

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## Bits & Bytes

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