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Thinking outside the plot: Alternative options to traditional burial are more widely available

Kate Lohnes  
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When it comes to funerals, many people think their options are to either be embalmed and buried, or cremated.

For those that are seeking more imaginative ways to dispose of their remains, there are other creative, even eco-friendly ways available. From sending ashes into space to graves dug by hand, it seems final resting places are inhibited only by our imaginations (or your pocket book).

One growing trend in the funeral industry today is the "green" burial, or disposing of bodies in a way that won't harm the earth. While traditional burial methods might look good above ground, they create a host of problems once buried, said Joe Sehee, founder and executive director of the Green Burial Council. These range from metal caskets tainting soil to hazardous embalming chemicals filtering into water supplies.

"Embalming fluid is a known carcinogen," he said. "We bury over 1 million gallons of form-based embalming fluid a year, and we have no idea how that will affect the ground water. It's pretty shocking."

While green burial lacks a formal definition, it usually means returning a body to the earth in a natural state. Instead of embalming a body and purchasing an elaborate casket, green burials use no chemicals. If a coffin is used, it is made from simple wood. Families can also use a burial shroud to cover the body instead. Many choose to be buried in a designated green cemetery, but it also is possible to have a green burial in traditional cemeteries, Sehee said.

Currently, there are three designated green cemeteries in the United States. In Huntsville, Texas, preservationist George Russell founded the country's third green cemetery, the 81-acre Ethician Family Cemetery, after purchasing the land in 2000. At this point, the cemetery has had three burials, with an increasing number of people expressing interest from around the country. It doesn't cost anything to be buried at the cemetery, although donations are expected, depending on the family's means. The cemetery is divided into 250 plots, Russell said, where families can bury up to 12 family members and 24 pets.

"We're nothing but recycled materials ourselves," he said. "If you want to talk about everlasting life, it's not poisoned with fluid and locked in a vault. It means being immediately recycled back into the earth."

Natural or green burial is hardly a new concept. It existed in many cultures over the years, including the United States, and still continues today in different parts of the world. As families became more spread out in the United States, it became part of tradition to try and preserve bodies longer through embalming so distant family members might travel to the funeral.

Other ecologically-sound remains disposals also exist for cremated remains. Eternal Reefs, Inc. in Decatur, Georgia adds ashes to artificial ocean reefs made from specially-engineered concrete.

"This is a way people can create a permanent environmental legacy that will last for the generation to come," said Don Brawley, founder of Eternal Reefs. "Not only do you create a memorial for yourself, but it's something you can give back to the planet as a whole. It's a win-win situation."

The "reef balls" Brawley's company makes are placed in ocean locales where new life needs to grow and provide a habitat for many different forms of ocean life. Brawley created the idea for artificial reefs with several college friends in the early '90s, but began adding cremated remains to the reef balls in 1998, when his father-in-law died.

"He said he'd rather spend eternity with all that life around him instead of in a field with a bunch of dead people," Brawley said. "I told that same story to a number of people, and they said, 'Wow, that's neat. Can you do that for other people?'"

If the ocean isn't your thing, you also can have your ashes sent out of this world. Starting at \$495, Space Services, Inc.'s Celestis service in Houston claims it will put a portion of your cremated remains in capsules and load them onto a rocket bound for space. Space Services also plans to launch missions to the moon and deep space starting in 2009.

"I've spoken with hundreds of families over the years," said Susan Schonfeld, a spokesperson for the company. "It doesn't matter who you are or where you LIVE, there's something that's so inbred in human beings and such a fascination with space. It's unfortunate that not many people can get there in their lifetimes, so this fulfills a wish for so many people."

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Green cemeteries and alternative services:

• Ethician Family Cemetery  
1401 19th St.  
Huntsville, TX 77340  
Web site: [www.ethicianfamilycemetery.org](http://www.ethicianfamilycemetery.org)  
E-mail: [ghr@cyberclone.net](mailto:ghr@cyberclone.net)  
Phone: (936) 295-5767

• Glendale Memorial Nature Preserve  
297 Railroad Avenue  
DeFuniak Springs FL 32433  
Web site: [www.glendalnaturepreserve.org](http://www.glendalnaturepreserve.org)  
Email: [info@glendalnaturepreserve.org](mailto:info@glendalnaturepreserve.org)  
Phone: (850) 859-2141

• Ramsey Creek Reserve  
111 W. Main St.  
Westminster, SC 29693  
Web sites: [www.memorialecosystems.com](http://www.memorialecosystems.com), [ramseycreekpreserve.com](http://ramseycreekpreserve.com)  
E-mail: [Kimberley@memorialecosystems.com](mailto:Kimberley@memorialecosystems.com)  
Phone: 864-647-7798

• Eternal Reefs Inc.  
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Email: [info@eternalreefs.com](mailto:info@eternalreefs.com)  
Phone: 888-423-7333  
Outside USA: 404-875-1876

• Celestis Memorial Spaceflights  
2476 Bolsover, # 415  
Houston, TX 77005  
Web site: [www.spaceservicesinc.com/MemorialSpaceflights](http://www.spaceservicesinc.com/MemorialSpaceflights)  
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