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Eco-friendly cemetery offers 'green burial'

For most people, planning a funeral means choosing between cremation and a traditional burial.

An average funeral costs about \$6,000, but now there is a way to save green if you're willing to go green.

When you think of a cemetery, usually dozens of rows of marble headstones crowded together lining acres of burial ground comes to mind.

However, one Texas cemetery is alive with the remains of people who chose to go green even in death.

"This place is unique and special because it's alive," said George Russell, owner of the Ethician Family Cemetery.

On the banks of the Trinity River there are dozens of species of birds, exotic wildlife and 81 acres of land unlike any other in Texas.

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"I feel like we're in a cathedral and I call this cathedral forest because the trees are upward of 80 to 90 feet in height," Russell said.

Russell founded the state's first green cemetery and it is an eco-friendly final resting place where a person is buried without embalming fluid and without a coffin.

"Green burial is a form of eternal life because we humans are nothing more than recycled material," he said.

Russell says that once the corpses are placed in the ground they become fertilizer and become food for the living.

"You have all sorts of micro-organisms and worms and the roots of trees that feed on you," Russell said.

Graves are dug by hand — no backhoes, just shovels — and families are encouraged to dig themselves.

"It makes it such an intimate experience for the family," Russell said.

Maria Catalano Burns, the wife of an Ethician Rabbi, was buried at the cemetery last September.

"The family brought her up in the back of their station wagon. To me it's much more intimate when the family takes the body of their loved one, and gently wraps it in a blanket or cloth," said Russell.

A cross and the Star of David adorn her final resting place.

Burns was buried in accordance with state law requiring bodies be buried 2½ feet below ground — not six feet under as many people think. Her remains were wrapped in a sheet.

Despite criticism from neighboring communities, Russell follows state funeral laws that include having a body buried at least 24 hours after someone has died, unless the corpse has been refrigerated.

Russell believes some people are just not comfortable with the idea of letting their remains return to nature in an unadulterated way.

"To me, the perhaps coldness of the modern funeral industry is less a goodbye to one's loved one," Russell said.

His mother died last year after 72 years of marriage. She's now one of five people buried in the Ethician Family Cemetery. Russell's father will eventually be buried alongside her.

"We loaded her in the pickup truck and brought her up here and let the dogs jump up and kiss her goodbye," Russell said.

As for Russell and his wife, they too will be going green, but he's hoping for an even more unusual burial. "

Russell encourages "sky burial," a Tibetan funeral practice in which the body of a dead person or an animal carcass is exposed to the open air to be eaten by vultures.

Though sky burials are no longer considered acceptable for humans, it's something Russell would like to see changed.

"As our dollars become more and more worthless and the cost of caskets goes up, there are going to be fewer and fewer people who are going to want to spend \$10,000 to put grandpa in the ground," he said.

Only a handful of places in the country provide green burials. As for the cost at the Ethician Family Cemetery, Russell asks for a \$5,000 donation for a family plot, but he says he would never turn anyone away.

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