

Green funerals make for eco-exits

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It's no longer enough to live a greener life — now people are being encouraged to be environmentally friendly when they leave the Earth too.

Cardboard coffins, clothes sewn from natural fibers, a burial plot in a natural setting. Green funerals attempt to be eco-friendly at every stage.

"People are trying to think about what's the best way to live and with that, what's the best way to die," said Roslyn Cassidy, a funeral director for Green Endings, which provides eco-friendly funerals.

Britain has been a world leader in eco-friendly funerals for years and a source of green burial products and ideas for countries like the United States, where the trend is just starting to catch on. Over the weekend in London, those in the business showcased their products and services at the Natural Death Center's Green Funeral Exhibition.

Some may expect green funerals to be as cheap as a do-it-yourself project, while others might brace for price hikes similar to those fair trade food.

But, funeral directors say green funerals — like any — run the gamut.

"It's about choice, not price," said Fran Hall, marketing director for Epping Forest Burial Park.

For a concept aimed at saving the Earth by going back to basics, an eco-funeral can be more complicated than it sounds. The Natural Death Center provides a handbook that suggests environmental targets for cemeteries.

"You can take any funeral and make it greener," said Michael Jarvis, the center's director.

In a green funeral, bodies are not embalmed and are dressed in pure fiber clothes. Green campaigners say refrigeration or dry ice is a good alternative to formaldehyde, which can seep into the water system.

Biodegradable coffins also differ from the traditional mahogany. Coffins on display included one made from wicker and decorated with flowers.

One visitor, Linda McDowall, admired another coffin bundled in a beige, leaf-adorned felt shroud, saying it looked comfortable.

"Cozy and warm are not words you associate with death," said McDowall, a 48-year-old German and French translator.

Cardboard coffins — which are as thick as their wooden counterparts — can be decorated by family and biodegrade within three months.

"The trouble is, they are a bit ungainly to use," said Oakfield Wood burial ground director Oliver Peacock. "They're not terribly easy to handle and if it's wet, they don't look their best either."

Particular care is taken in how coffins are buried at eco-friendly graveyards like Oakfield Wood, Peacock said.

The cemetery was a pasture when it opened in 1995. It is now speckled with more than 1,600 trees that mark plots along with a wooden plaque.

Marble tombstones are frowned upon. Jeremy Smite, a funeral director at Green Endings, notes that shipping and mining produce carbon and that marble is not a renewable resource.

For cremations — which account for 70 percent of British funerals — a person's ashes and the remains of the eco-friendly coffin are placed in bamboo, glass or ceramic urns.

New legislation in Britain requires reductions in the mercury content of plastics and treatments used in coffins starting in 2010. All biodegradable coffins meet the new standards.

Cassidy said small details are important for green funerals, such as using smaller cars instead of limousines in funeral processions.

"What people are wanting is to know that they're doing the best they can both for their loved ones and for the environment," Cassidy said.

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