



The Meetinghouse Hill Cemetery in West Brattleboro is one of three cemeteries in Vermont allowing green burials.

Photo Provided

Green burials

Create a bond to living spaces by returning your body to place

By Neil Allen
Standard Correspondent

“In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” — Benjamin Franklin

As a society, we spend a lot of time, and money, trying to avoid both. Neither evoke comfortable conversations and most feel the less said about either of them the better. Green Burial Vermont, a not-for-profit corporation located in Roxbury, is trying to change that — at least for burials.

Michelle Acciavatti, along with four other volunteers, took up the task of finding out what the options were for green burials in 2017 when they formed the organization Green Burial Vermont. They had been advocating to make green burials an option in Vermont for a few years.

The purpose of their group, according to their website, is “to facilitate the creation and operation of green cemeteries (both “hybrid” cemeteries as well as “conservation” burial grounds) in a manner that will maximize environmental benefit in the community, and offer ethical, spiritual and financial value to those who wish to plan for a green burial.”

During a presentation on green burials at the Forest Center in the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National State Park on Saturday, Acciavatti defined a green burial as “caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact that aids in the conservation of natural resources, reduction of carbon emissions, protection of worker health, and the restoration and/or preservation of habitat.”

This environmentally sensitive method is reframing how people think about burials, according to Acciavatti.

Conventional burials as we know them today began during the Civil War. Families wanted the bodies of their dead family member returned to them for burial at home. This

required those dealing with the bodies to turn to the ancient Egyptian technique of embalming the dead so that the bodies could be returned to the families with little to no decomposing, according to Acciavatti. Then, she said, people discovered that

you could make money from burying people and the natural cycle was broken.

“Green burials allow you to return your body to the cycle of nature, conserve land and create habitat while doing as little as possible to interfere with the decomposition process,” Acciavatti said.

In green burials, there is no embalming as the body is kept at about 40F until the burial, which can allow the body to be stored for a few days to up to three weeks; the casket, if there is one,

is made of soft wood that will decompose at a similar rate to the body; there are no grave vaults; and the body is buried at a depth of about 3.5-

feet. And, non-environmentally friendly concrete is not used for the vault or headstone. Concrete is soluble and can release chemicals that are not wanted in the ground, said Acciavatti.

The depth is a key factor in green burials. Before 2015, the law required bodies to be buried at five feet to allow for the vault. The change in the law made green burials a legal option, though, Acciavatti confessed, people had been doing it before 2015.

The 3.5-foot deep grave allows for the body to be in

“Your body is localized but it spreads throughout — your molecules will travel the world.”
— Michelle Acciavatti, Green Burial Vermont



Biodegradable greener caskets break down more readily in the soil, like this wicker casket made from willow.

Photo Provided

Acciavatti assured the audience that most animals like dogs and coyotes are only able to really dig holes about two feet deep and it was almost always done to find a cool place to rest than to find food.

“I get asked about that in every one of these presentations,” she said. “Coyotes are scavengers, they’re looking for easy meals. They’re not digging up dead bodies. And there is no smell, as the soil is a living organism and it creates a chemical barrier. Cation in the soil fixes the chemicals in place.”

A green burial allows the body to help the environment in a variety of ways, said Acciavatti. “The body feeds the soil which feeds the plants that create oxygen then that becomes rain,” she explained. “Your body

a sacred space,” she said. “When people are looking to develop conserved lands, they are not going to want to disturb graves.”

The body is completely decomposed in 10 years, said Acciavatti. And, the site can be used for another body.

“All that is left are the hard bones and teeth,” she said. “In Poland, you lease a grave site for 15 years. Anything that is left can be pushed into the soil, put in an ossuary or taken home. Then the grave site can be reused. You can do this with green burials.”

Cremations, which are happening more and more because they’re cheap and efficient, are bad for the environment because they create a massive amount of carbon dioxide and release

gypsum and peat, which is available from companies that make compost. The ashes could then be mixed into the soil and still offer some benefit to the land.

The containers that can be used in green burials include anything that is biodegradable, natural materials or has a minimal barrier.

“You can use a shroud, quilt, pine box or other soft wood or your birthday suit,” said Acciavatti. “Make sure it isn’t chemically treated — polyester, flame retardants or other synthetic materials.”

According to Acciavatti, there are social and emotional benefits to the process of a green burial.

“In a conventional burial, the body is taken away and there’s not a lot to do other than decide how the service will be handled. But there

are a lot of feelings. With green burials, you are time limited and acting in service of the body,” she explained. “You can dig the grave, carry the body to the grave, hand lower the body into the grave and cover the body. You have an active role which reduces prolonged grief and helps with the mourning process.”

For those who are considering a green burial, there are a few steps to take to be prepared before your death.

“Your burial and funeral wishes should be part of your advanced care planning. Choose an agent of disposition,” Acciavatti said. “Share your wishes with your family and friends, choose a place, the container and the ceremony.”

“When choosing a family cemetery [burying the body on your property], the burial needs to be recorded on the deed and with the town and it is better to do it before the

person dies but it can be done afterwards,” she continued.

Vermont requires the location of burials to be known by the town and there are specific siting and zoning rules, which will be known by the town’s health officer and cemetery commission.

“Locate an area that meets siting requirements; make sure it is not near the house or neighbors; draw a map to the burial site and record it with the town clerk — you can use GPS or distances from landmarks; and think about the ease of accessibility. The burial site [or easement] becomes a public right-of-way,” Acciavatti recommended.

Green burials can be marked by the GPS coordinates, an aluminum pin, wooden head markers that will decompose over time, corner markers or a flat native stone that is not polished, though it can be carved. This allows descendants to know where you are buried.

Currently there are 150 green burial sites across the country with three in Vermont: Meetinghouse Hill Cemetery in West Brattleboro, Hazen-Westview Cemetery in North Hero and Robinson Cemetery in East Calais. Acciavatti said there were two more in the works and encouraged the audience to talk to their local committees to see if more can be created.

If you are interested in having your town consider green burials, Acciavatti recommends having three people approach the cemetery committee, which will require them to consider green burials. Members of Green Burial Vermont are available to come to the meeting at no cost or they can refer experts, who can charge a fee, that can speak to the committee. They can be reached at greenburialvermont.org or greenburialvermont@gmail.com.

A GREENER WAY TO GO

From preparing bodies to burying them in natural settings, the green burial movement is attempting to make death more environmentally friendly and, in some ways, closer to the way it was in the past. A comparison:

STANDARD BURIAL

Burials use formaldehyde embalming and long-lasting caskets. They can easily cost \$10,000.

A standard grave site, often landscaped and well-maintained, features a large headstone made of granite or flat bronze. Fertilizer and pesticides are used on the grass.

Below ground, a casket made of steel, finished wood and copper rests inside a concrete vault capped by a thick concrete lid.

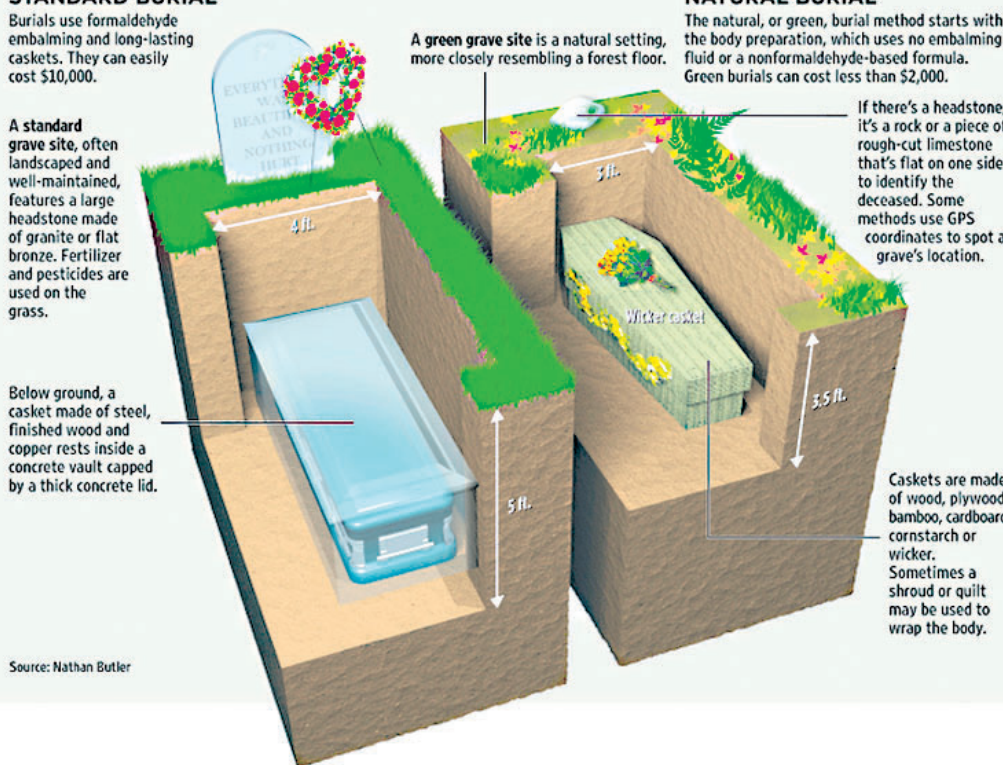
Source: Nathan Butler

NATURAL BURIAL

The natural, or green, burial method starts with the body preparation, which uses no embalming fluid or a nonformaldehyde-based formula. Green burials can cost less than \$2,000.

If there’s a headstone, it’s a rock or a piece of rough-cut limestone that’s flat on one side to identify the deceased. Some methods use GPS coordinates to spot a grave’s location.

Caskets are made of wood, plywood, bamboo, cardboard, cornstarch or wicker. Sometimes a shroud or quilt may be used to wrap the body.



contact with the active layers of the soil, which contains the colonies of decomposers, and allows for aerobic decomposition. It also gives the decomposing body access to heat and oxygen, which are needed to keep the process going.

is localized but it spreads throughout — your molecules will travel the world.”

Green burial sites can offer an extra layer of protection for conserved lands, according to Acciavatti. Regardless of how you are buried, “it is still considered

other toxins into the air, according to Acciavatti. “They have a huge carbon footprint.”

She said that if the body was cremated the ashes could still be buried if they’re amended with a mixture of active compost,