

# Poughkeepsie Journal

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## Green Burials offer eco-friendly option

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Karen Maserjian Shan 12:07 a.m. EDT March 28, 2015

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Natural  
Burial  
Section at  
Rosendale  
Plains  
Cemetery

Kesii “Journey Truth” MacKaye believes people don’t merely live on the Earth.

Rather, she said, they are a part of the planet, a remarkable resource that provides everything people need, from food to shelter to clothing and more.

And so, when she passes, she’d like to return the favor by having a natural burial, where her remains will seamlessly combine with and fortify the earth’s elements. Already, she’s purchased a lot in the natural burial section at the Rosendale Cemetery in Tillson, Ulster County.

“I feel that the planet Earth gave me my body so I would like to give it back,” said MacKaye, who is 103 and lives in Rosendale.

Natural or green burials are of interest to others, too. According to the 2007 Funeral and Burial Planners Survey by AARP, about one-fifth, or 21 percent, of respondents were interested or very interested in an environmentally friendly burial; that is one that’s more eco-friendly than a traditional burial with embalming.

Joe Sehee, founder of the Green Burial Council, said green burials don’t involve the use of resources or toxins, but instead provide an option that has a positive effect on the environment.

“It’s a way of caring for the dead that furthers one of several environmental issues: protecting worker health, reducing carbon emissions, preserving habitat and preserving resources,” he said.

Here, the burials are done by wrapping the deceased in a shroud or putting the body in a suitable casket, that is, one that hasn't been treated with chemicals or other toxins, and laying it to rest in a hole in the ground. The site then is covered with dirt and distinguished with a natural marker, like a large stone. In this way, the body and shroud or casket naturally decompose into the earth.

"The biggest drive is people find solace in connecting death to life," Sehee said. "It's more psychology and spirituality. Green burial allows them to be part of the cycle we see all around in nature."

Sehee said many formalities associated with traditional burials aren't necessities, but preferences. For instance, embalming the decedent before burial to preserve the body is customary, but not required, and typically involves the use of formaldehyde, a toxic chemical, although non-toxic embalming fluids now are available.

Conventional burials also usually include a burial vault, which is a large, concrete and metal cavity that's set in the ground and into which a casket is lowered. Vaults sometimes are used to help stabilize gravesites but Sehee said the production and transportation of them is associated with high levels of carbon emissions.

In New York state, funeral arrangements must be made by a licensed and registered funeral director, according to the NYS Department of Health, including filing the death certificate plus the care, transportation, preparation and burial or cremation of the deceased. The state doesn't mandate a casket or burial vault, but some cemeteries do. Neither is embalming required by law, but a funeral home may require it for specific services.

The Rosendale Cemetery opened a natural burial section about the size of a football field in September.

Richard Hermance, president of the Rosendale Cemetery Association, liked the idea of establishing a section for natural burial sites at the cemetery, especially since the local community is environmentally aware.

"Simply put, a natural burial does not use formaldehyde," Hermance said. "There's no embalming. You basically just use a shroud and put the body in the ground."

The natural burial site at the Rosendale Cemetery prohibits the use of burial vaults and only non-toxic embalming fluid, plus nontoxic or natural/plant derived burial containers or shrouds are allowed.

To date, a few people have purchased natural burial plots, said Hermance, and he's gotten a lot of positive feedback for the natural burial site, including interest from people

in Albany and New York City, along with funeral homes looking to satisfy clients that want natural burials.

Interest comes from a general movement toward more natural practices, he said, but also the relatively affordable cost of natural burials as well as cremations. At the Rosendale Cemetery, a natural burial plot costs \$550 plus the cost of a grave marker. Some families want to dig their loved one's grave, themselves, which Hermance is looking into, per insurance-related issues.

"The body just decomposes and goes back into the earth," he said.

Sehee said the baby-boom generation, in particular, will put green burials on the map, since the population has a high appreciation of environmental issues, even to the extent of living in ways that support the natural resources through, for instance, composting, forgoing plastic shopping bags and otherwise working to minimize its carbon footprint.

"Green burial allows many people to make a statement and find solace in something we haven't been able to find solace in, in a long time," he said.

Aside from the environmental aspect, the relatively inexpensive cost for green burials is a factor of their appeal, said Sehee, with interest highest in the nation's mid-west and south, as well as the northeast, all areas typically associated with costly, traditional burials. Conventional funerals and burials, he said, run in the \$10,000 range, while green burials can be half the amount. Cremation is still cheaper, at about \$1,000, excluding the cost of a service, he said.

In the offing are burial sites designed to protect habitats, said Sehee, including those involving parks services, along with burial acreage purchased by individuals or families, and deeded to an adjacent park after a certain period of time.


"Green burials really allow for people to let go and let nature take its course," he said. "Some people find great comfort in that."


MackKaye said what matters most is love and togetherness, including loving and caring for each other and our planet. And so, when it's her time, she'll have her remains secured to a board then lowered into the ground at the Rosendale Cemetery. It's her hope that a tree or bush will be planted at her burial site and that friends and family will leave inspirational notes there every now and then. Her dearest vision is of children playing over the spot where she was buried and returned to the earth.

"I feel that if we take my body after it's finished its use here on this planet that it would go back to the earth and be recycled," she said. "It would be lovely."

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## **Green burial sites**

•Rosendale Cemetery, including natural burial section, 793 Springtown Road, Tillson; 845-658-9181  845-658-9181;  
[www.rosendalecemetery.com/Natural\\_Burial\\_Section.php](http://www.rosendalecemetery.com/Natural_Burial_Section.php)

•Town of Rhinebeck Cemetery, Natural Burial Ground, 3 Mill Road, Rhinebeck; 845-876-3961  845-876-3961;  
[www.rhinebeck-ny.gov/town-cemetery-committee/announcements/natural-burial-rhinebeck-cemetery](http://www.rhinebeck-ny.gov/town-cemetery-committee/announcements/natural-burial-rhinebeck-cemetery)

### **Green cemetery ratings**

Hybrid burial grounds are conventional cemeteries that don't require decedents to be embalmed nor the use of vaults but do accept eco-friendly containers and shrouds.

Natural burial grounds prohibit the use of vaults, toxic embalming fluid and burial containers that aren't eco-friendly. The site also must have an integrated pest management policy in place to maintain a natural, native appearance.

Conservation burial grounds follow natural burial ground requirements plus pursue land conservation, including a conservation easement for long-term stewardship.

[http://greenburialcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CemeteryIntroInfo-Hybrid\\_Nat\\_Cons.pdf](http://greenburialcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CemeteryIntroInfo-Hybrid_Nat_Cons.pdf)