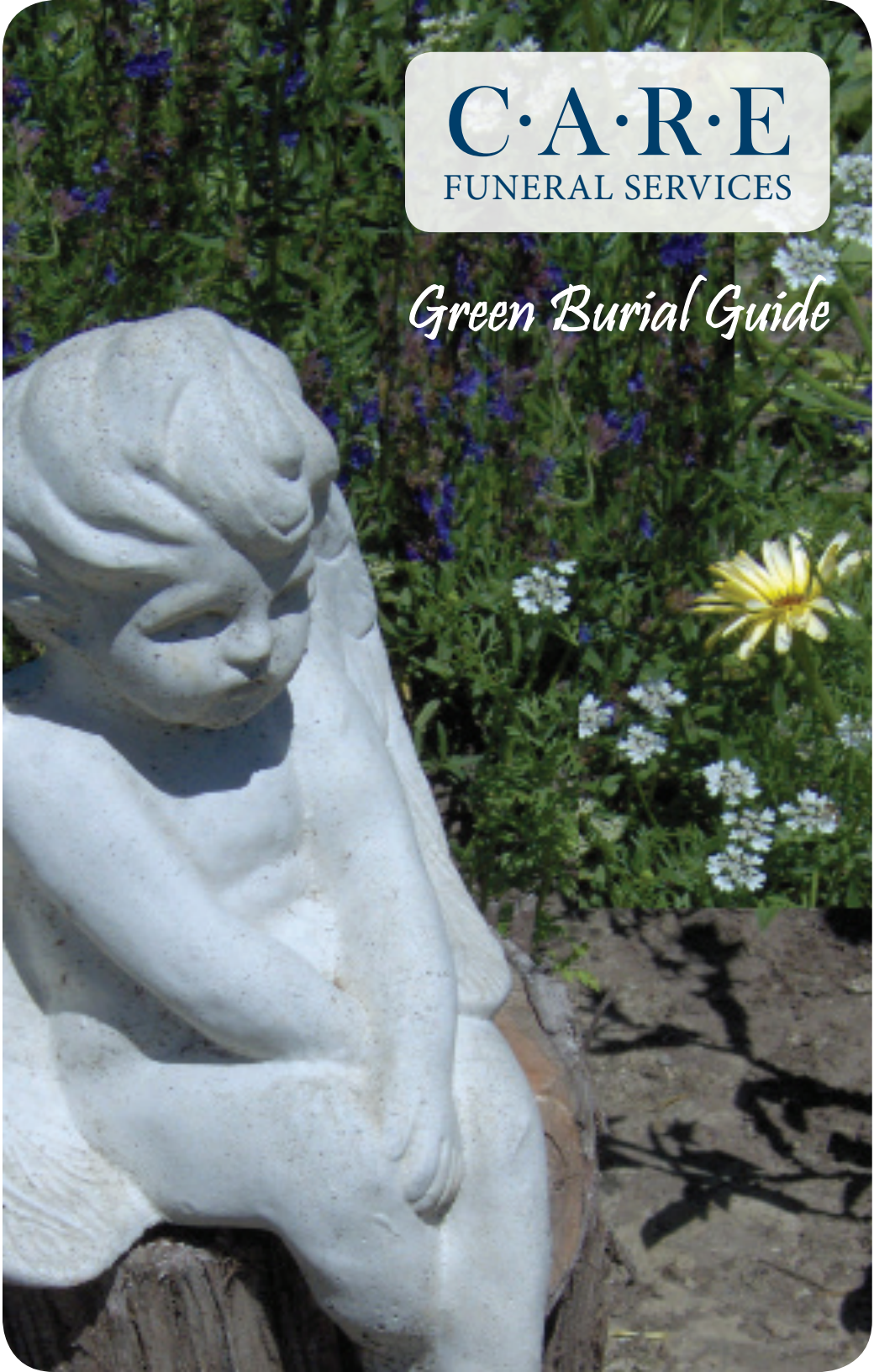
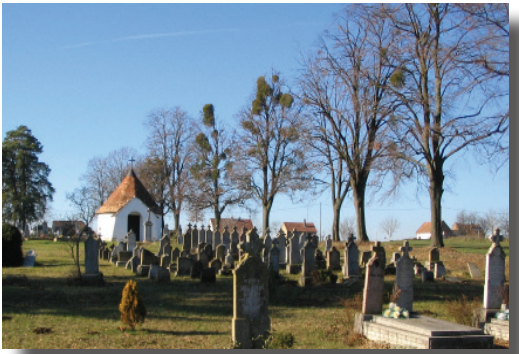

C·A·R·E
FUNERAL SERVICES
Green Burial Guide

History of Green Burial

Green burials are not a new thing. The ritual of laying our loved ones to rest is as old as our existence. However, for thousands of years we returned the remains of those who passed from this life directly back to the earth. Researchers found burial grounds of Neanderthal man dating back as far as 60,000 BC. Even then, the grave was adorned with animal antlers and flower fragments. The oldest funeral monuments were simple and natural - a mound of earth or a heap of stones marking the location of the remains. It seems even early humankind instinctually recognized the need to honour their loved ones.

Until the last century, most burials were handled by family, and were "green." Those that passed were simply laid directly in the ground on a plot of family land. As families grew and expanded geographically, burials were not always done close to home. Family and neighbours would come and pay their respects, sometimes travelling long distances. Oftentimes the closest relative would keep the loved one's body in a simple pine box in the living room or parlor for viewing. Anyone within travelling



distance would come to visit and then there was usually a community ceremony to honour the deceased. Many families did not own land and some people died with no family in attendance. Public spaces, often in a church yard or a spot designated by the township, were now set aside as places to bury those who died.

Church congregations or village councils now found that they needed to handle the arrangements. Even many families that owned land started following the social practice of burying their loved ones in a central community location. As a result, contemporary funeral practices began.

The practices of embalming a body and using a casket are adaptations brought about by the necessities of those times. Embalming became common when the remains of loved ones needed to be transported a long distance to be returned to families back home. This was certainly the case during times of war, and after about 1860 AD almost all bodies were preserved in this manner.

The art of embalming actually dates back to 4000 BC and the Egyptian culture, but it was rediscovered when there was a need. The remains of loved ones were protected by caskets and preserved for these journeys. At first, caskets were made of wicker or

softwoods, but they developed into more elaborate pieces made of exotic hardwoods and precious materials. As well, caskets were now on public lands, and many burial sites required impenetrable vaults of metal and concrete rather than a traditional burial directly in the earth.

In the last few decades a resurgence in green burials has arisen which stems, for the most part, from a concern for the environment. The reappearance of green burial in modern times was first documented in Great Britain. The high cremation rate on this densely populated island sparked a widespread backlash from environmentalists. Britain was the first to recognize the need for an alternative to cremation and they responded by establishing the first official green burial park in 1993. Great Britain now has more than 270 green cemeteries, but Canada has been slower to respond. Here in Victoria, BC we are fortunate to have one of two of the only green burial sites in this country.

Why Green Burial?

Concern for the environment is a primary reason for choosing a green burial, although one's personal preferences and lifestyle are key factors too. Not everyone wants to be buried beneath a manicured lawn.

A growing concern for our planet, and living a life in balance with nature, is extremely important for many people today. Once life comes to a close, it is just as crucial to go out naturally and cause as little damage as possible as it was while living. Green burial is an important positive choice that addresses environmental concerns

and changes the way we go about laying our loved ones to rest. Natural burial grounds are not landscaped. They are woodland and meadow areas where bodies are buried among natural vegetation.

One of the biggest concerns in conventional burial is embalming. Work is underway to develop nontoxic and naturally derived embalming fluids, but the current industry standard needs improvement. Luckily, no state or province in North America requires the routine embalming of bodies. Mechanical refrigeration may be used instead, avoiding the issue of what happens to the embalming fluid once the body returns to the

earth. Many cultures around the world have buried their loved ones for centuries without embalming the bodies. Orthodox Jews and Muslims utilize green burial practices and have done so for thousands of years. Jewish tradition prohibits embalming, as the blood is considered a part of the body to be buried with the deceased. Coffins are constructed of wood without any metal so the body easily returns to the earth. The body must be laid to rest within three days of death.

Muslims believe that death is a departure from the life of this world, but not the end of a person's existence, so the body is cleansed, wrapped in a shroud and buried. The body is buried facing Mecca.

Embalming fluid is only one of the environmental concerns of traditional burials. There are also emissions from transportation, waste from floral tributes and the construction of traditional caskets from non-renewable, old-growth hardwoods. Cemeteries require continuous maintenance as they are fastidiously groomed grass. Grave markers, headstones and vaults are made to stand

out, not blend in to the landscape, and take extensive energy and materials to construct. Instead, going green involves fine-tuning the process so it is in balance with nature.

What is Green Burial?

A green burial has a low impact on the environment, uses less energy, consumes fewer resources, is less toxic, and may include local, sustainable materials. The simplest green burial includes a biodegradable coffin, but the embalming process and a grave liner are eliminated. The most desirable location is in a natural setting with native plants and shrubs. There are no concrete vaults and headstones are replaced by indigenous rocks or native plants. Pesticides are not used on the site. These burial sites are a place where individual graves become part of the local natural landscape and contribute to the environmental sustainability of the community ecosystem, not an area cordoned off by fences and rows of planted trees.

The process begins by preparing the body so that it will return to the earth as naturally and organically as possible. A temperature controlled facility temporarily holds the body and it undergoes basic care including bathing and disinfecting. The body is wrapped in an organic shroud made of cotton and then placed in a biodegradable casket. Some families wish to participate in the dressing, shrouding, and casketing of the body, but this is optional. CARE Funeral will ensure that your loved one receives

the respect and attention that they deserve throughout the green burial process. Traditional burial requires a concrete vault for the casket, but green burial eliminates this and the casket is placed directly into the earth. Through time, the body decomposes and contributes to the cycle of life.

Traditional headstones are not permitted, but alternatives exist such as having your loved one's name inscribed on a community memorial boulder nearby.

What About Cremation?

In Canada, the majority of people choose cremation and CANA (Cremation Association of North America) predicts that the numbers will continue to increase in the future. In BC alone, the percentage of the population choosing cremation is expected to rise to 82% by 2016. While cremation is not as green an option since it burns fossil fuels, it does have a smaller carbon footprint than traditional burial.

If cremation is your choice, you can lower the impact on the environment by choosing an environmentally friendly urn. Urns may be made of bamboo, cornstarch, salt, sand and gelatin, or paper. They are extremely attractive and have little or no impact on the environment and are completely biodegradable. There are countless styles and designs and many resemble less eco-friendly materials such as hardwoods or non-renewable stone.

Scattering tubes are made of compressed paper and decompose. All of these options are very attractive and you would be hard-pressed to notice they are alternatives.

What Can We Do to Go Green?

CARE Funeral Services has environmentally friendly solutions for laying a loved to rest. Caskets are now available that are made from renewable resources such as willow, sea grass, wool or bamboo. There are even cardboard coffins that are suitable for burial and completely biodegradable. All of these options are attractive and gentle on the earth.

Locally sourced sustainable second growth wood is also a possibility for a wooden casket. The wood is either untreated or darkened with natural oil. Caskets use alternative fastening mechanisms as no metal hardware is permitted. The interiors of the caskets are lined with unbleached cotton which is biodegradable and safe for the environment.

CARE Funeral Services is here to discuss all of the possibilities for a green burial, including alternatives to traditional headstones and floral arrangements. Floral arrangements decay, but leave behind wires and plastics used to hold the arrangements together. Traditional markers are often made of marble or granite, both stones which are not available locally.

Your loved one's transition to the earth can be graceful and non-intrusive to the environment. All it takes is a little forethought to lessen the impact of your loved one's transition. If you have any questions or concerns regarding green burial, please call and talk to any of our highly experienced staff. CARE is always here to personally help you in your time of need.

All nature has a feeling: woods, fields, brooks
Are life eternal: and in silence they
Speak happiness beyond the reach of books;
There's nothing mortal in them; their decay
Is the green life of change; to pass away
And come again in blooms revivified.
Its birth was heaven, eternal it its stay,
And with the sun and moon shall still abide
Beneath their day and night and heaven wide.

John Clare (1793 - 1864)