

Green burials offer natural end-of-life option

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When Maria Mariana began researching burial options for her dying godfather, she wasn't really sure where to start.

Her godfather, David Brush, did what he could to conserve water and energy in his home. His last wish was to be buried sustainably because, as he told Mariana, today's traditional burials are costly and inefficient.

So before his death, Brush, 71, decided on a green burial, a process that tries to leave the burial site as natural as possible, using biodegradable materials in the process.

Conventional embalming fluids, concrete vaults and markers are restricted in order to maintain the natural landscape. And only flat stones or area wildlife mark the area where a loved one is buried.

After trying to find a provider in the Gainesville area, Mariana found her options limited.

The closest green cemetery was in the Florida Panhandle, and since no embalming fluids or traditional methods are used during green burials, Mariana said fuel costs and time constraints would have made the trip costly and difficult.

But then she heard about Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery.

The 78-acre "green" cemetery near Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park broke ground on July 20 with the burial of local environmental activist Kathy Cantwell.

Two days later Brush passed away.

"It was just an awesome experience to be able to provide for my godfather what his wishes were -- to come from the earth and to go back into the earth," Mariana said.

This is the way people were traditionally buried before the Civil War, said Freddie Johnson, president of the Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery board of directors.

Today's conventional burial methods typically require embalming while the body waits to be buried -- sometimes weeks after death. But green burials typically occur 24 to 48 hours after death.

An AARP study done in May 2007 found that almost one quarter of persons surveyed over the age of 50 said they would consider a natural or green burial.

That's up from five years ago, when the option barely existed, said Green Burial Council executive director Joe Sehee.

The Green Burial Council is an organization based out of Santa Fe, N.M., that sets statutes for green burials.

Only 23 of the nation's estimated 22,500 cemeteries are certified through the council, although far more, including Gainesville's Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery, are taking the final steps in the process.

Prairie Creek will be the council's third conservation cemetery in the country. It meets the Conservation Burial Ground standard, the highest level of certification offered by the Green Burial Council.

While green cemeteries may include conventional cemeteries that have areas set aside for green burials, conservation cemeteries like Prairie Creek typically take the process a step further by using funds from the burial sites to conserve land. That means the land and landscape of the cemetery will be completely restored to its natural condition and protected forever by a perpetual conservation easement.

A green burial can save money, too.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, a traditional funeral, including a casket and vault, costs about \$6,000.

Extras like flowers, obituary notices, acknowledgment cards or limousines can add thousands of dollars to the final costs. Many funerals run well over \$10,000.

Cremation is a less expensive option, typically costing \$1,000 to \$5,000, according to Susan Marynowski, secretary of the Prairie Creek board of directors.

She said green burials usually start at \$1,500 and are no more than \$4,000.

Their site has a \$2,000 fee.

This \$2,000 fee -- a fraction of prices paid elsewhere -- allowed Mariana to honor her godfather's final wishes.

"If it's something that people are interested in doing, it's definitely important to do the research. It may seem like a daunting task, but when you're able to fulfill the person's wishes, it really comes out being a very fulfilling and learning process," Mariana said.

Interested in finding out more? Contact the Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery at 352-375-8739 or visit www.conservationburialinc.org.

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