

Keweenaw Green Burial Alliance 'Frequently Asked Questions'

What is the difference between a conventional burial and a green burial?

One of the aims of a conventional burial is to preserve the body for as long as possible by protecting it from both its inner and outer microbial environment. It involves embalming, a metal or wood casket, and a concrete vault, all of which represent both a significant consumption of earth's resources and the contamination of the earth's soil.

One of the aims of a green burial, on the other hand, is to allow the body to be returned to the earth as quickly as possible, encouraging microbial decomposition as a way to both nourish the earth and minimize the use of the earth's resources. The goal is to embrace the body's return to the earth, the true "dust to dust" form of burial.

How does conventional burial contaminate the earth's soil?

Over time, a typical ten-acre swath of cemetery ground (Forest Hill cemetery in Houghton has 80 acres) contains enough coffin wood (frequently high quality tropical hardwoods) to construct more than 40 houses, nearly 1,000 tons of casket steel and another 20,000 tons of vault concrete (enough to build about five miles of one-lane road). Moreover, those 20,000 tons of concrete have about 6,000,000 pounds of CO₂ embedded in its production---not including transporting it from the concrete plant to the cemetery. This is equivalent to burning about 300,000 gallons of gasoline.

Those same ten acres have absorbed a significant volume of toxic formalin (formaldehyde-containing embalming fluid), many gallons of pesticide and weed killer, and even more gallons of water for landscaping maintenance of cemetery grounds.

What's wrong with embalming? I thought it was required.

Conventional embalming replaces body fluids with formaldehyde in order to preserve the body but it doesn't preserve the body for all time; the body will eventually break down and leach formaldehyde into the ground. Although there is no conclusive evidence that it causes any appreciable contamination of the soil, formaldehyde is on the EPA's list of recognized carcinogens and poses a risk for people exposed to it in their workplace.

Many families choose to embalm the body so that they see the restored appearance of their deceased as they remember him or her. Most Michigan funeral directors require embalming if there is to be a viewing of the body. Although embalming has become standard practice, no federal law states that a body must be embalmed and Michigan law only requires embalming in rare specific cases (see 48-hour rule below).

If a family chooses not to have their deceased embalmed, but wants to have time for friends and family to pay their respects to the body, refrigeration or dry ice can also be used effectively for 3-5 days following death. Please consult with your funeral director since this is not a common practice in the U.P.

What is the 48-hour rule?

The 48-hour rule refers to Michigan government administrative health code R 325.1141-325.1142 which

mandated embalming of a body that needed to be preserved longer than 48 hours for transportation purposes, specifically transportation from the hands of one funeral director to another funeral director or jurisdiction using a “common carrier” such as a plane or train. The rule was created at a time when shipment of biological materials was considered unsafe, before the options of sealed containers or refrigeration were available. The rule did **not** state that all bodies must be embalmed if not otherwise disposed of within 48 hours of death.

The 48-hour rule has been interpreted by many funeral directors in Michigan to mean that any body that has not been buried or cremated within 48 hours after death must be embalmed. You might want to talk with your funeral director while [pre-planning your green burial](#) if this is a concern of yours.

For more information about the 48-hour rule, please see [Michigan-Specific Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Information Pertaining to After Death Care and Disposition](#) prepared by Erika Nelson, MSW and Michigan Mortuary Science Licensee. For much more information regarding funeral and burial practices in Michigan, visit the [Michigan Affiliate of the Funeral Consumers Information Society](#).

Aren't vaults required to protect water quality?

Vaults (concrete grave liners) are frequently required by cemeteries to prevent grave collapse and to make grounds maintenance easier, not to protect water quality.

If my body is buried without a concrete vault, isn't there danger of animals digging it up?

Our research on this issue has consistently found that wildlife is extremely unlikely to disturb a burial that is at least two feet under the surface. Please see our [Report on Grave Depth and Wildlife](#).

How deep will the body be buried?

Graves are generally excavated three to three and a half feet deep (“six feet under” is a bit of a myth). The deeper you bury a body, the longer it will take to fully decompose. Aerobic bacteria, the kind that are needed for decomposition, are most abundant in the upper layers of the soil. Generally soil is mounded over the grave so that the body will be covered with about two and a half to three feet of soil. Graves will settle naturally, depending on weather and precipitation.

What materials ARE acceptable in green burial grounds?

Biodegradable caskets can be made of cardboard, softwoods like pine or poplar, or wicker baskets. A shroud can be made of any natural fibers such as cotton, hemp, linen, silk or wool; polyester and acrylic are not natural fibers. Green embalming fluid that does not contain formaldehyde is acceptable. Memorial markers that meet the cemeteries' regulations for size and placement should be natural stone or wood.

Isn't cremation the best green alternative to conventional burials?

It's true that cremation doesn't require embalming or the use of caskets or vaults. It also is more economical than conventional -- or green -- burial, it doesn't require as much land space, and there are almost no restrictions on disposal of the cremains. However, it burns fossil fuel and generates CO2 emissions. The low population density of the Copper Country means infrequent cremations in our two local crematoria; thus a tremendous amount of fuel is burned just to bring the furnace up to the intensity required for incineration of a human body. In addition, crematories have been identified as sources of various environmental pollutants,

including mercury.

Cremation short-circuits the body's return to the cycle of life.

Can one have a green burial in the Keweenaw?

Yes! We have several cemeteries that now offer green burial options. For a complete listing, visit our [Local Cemeteries Page](#).

What if I die in the winter?

With the one exception of Chassell Township Cemetery (see above) cemeteries in the Keweenaw no longer do winter burials. Current practice involves embalming and storage in a cold storage building until the spring. Local funeral directors have access to green embalming fluids that do not contain formaldehyde, but planning ahead would be necessary to make sure that they have it at the time of death. Please see our [Green Burial planner](#).

What about a using a gravestone?

Most green burial grounds are set aside as natural areas without landscaping or mowing, and the use of memorial markers is up to the cemetery. Memorial markers may be permitted if they are of wood or natural stone and flush with the ground. The cemetery may permit the planting of a bush or tree. Records of the location of each body will be kept by the cemetery and made available to families and friends.

How much does it cost to have a green burial in the Keweenaw?

Green burial is not free, but the costs are generally less than a conventional burial because you don't have to buy a vault, you can provide your own shroud or buy an inexpensive container, and you can forgo embalming. Some funeral directors are pricing their own services for a basic green burial about the same as for a basic cremation - thus the main difference would be the cost of the plot & grave opening/closing vs. the crematory fee.

There will be considerable variation in all pricing, so it's hard to predict or compare exact costs. We highly recommend that you consult with more than one funeral director to understand their price sheet and what they will or will not provide for green burial support.

But in any case, you should expect to at least pay...

1. for the services of a funeral director to supervise the handling and disposition of the body (required by law in Michigan),
2. for a special shroud (unless you provide your own wrap), or a simple coffin or cardboard container,
3. for the gravesite (prices vary and are subject to change - funeral directors should have current price lists or you can contact the cemetery),
4. for cemetery services, i.e. the opening and closing of the grave (pricing depends on cemetery fee schedule and circumstances).

Extra green burial costs may include dry ice or refrigeration if the body needs to be preserved for more than 48 hours or winter cemetery services (including plowing through snow to the gravesite). Funeral services, flowers,

lunches, a memorial marker, etc. are always extra no matter what approach you take.

Again, prices vary and change, but at least in the Keweenaw Peninsula you should be able to get yourself a green burial for a cost not much higher than cremation.

Can I be buried on my own private property?

Yes. In Michigan a landowner and their family are allowed to be buried on his/her own land. The designated family plot must meet Health Department requirements and will be inspected. The plot must also be surveyed and recorded in the county records; the presence of graves shall be protected in perpetuity. Getting your family plot approved and recorded takes time and should be done well in advance of death. You can learn more at the Western UP Health Department.

Does KGBA own a cemetery?

No. Although many KGBA members would like to have access to a conservation cemetery, it is not part of our current plan to actually own a cemetery. We feel fortunate that some local cemeteries are willing to set aside areas of their cemetery grounds for green burials.

What is a conservation cemetery?

The Green Burial Council lists the standards for three different types of green burial grounds, **Hybrid, Natural and Conservation Burial Grounds**. All of them proscribe the use of formaldehyde-based embalming, non-biodegradable caskets and cement vaults. **Natural Burial Grounds** do not have formal landscaping. They are areas preserved in a natural state or planted with flora native to the region. **Conservation Burial Grounds**, in addition to meeting these requirements, must protect in perpetuity an area of land specifically and exclusively designated for conservation. A land trust organization such as the Keweenaw Land Trust (keweenawlandtrust.org) must hold a conservation easement that guarantees long-term stewardship.

What is a home funeral? And what does it have to do with green burial?

Not so long ago people often died in their own homes, with family, friends and neighbors providing care for them and support for the survivors. For the last 100 years or so, the care of our dead has gradually been turned over to businesses. Recent interest in a return to home funerals has evolved with people who want to be more involved with the care of their deceased. These are often the same folks who want green burials, especially since many funeral homes won't allow visitation without embalming.

“Home funeral” means caring for the dead body in the home; washing, dressing and cooling with dry ice, inviting friends and family to a home visitation or wake, having a funeral service and/or a green burial. Family and friends might also participate in the burial by digging the hole, carrying the body and lowering it into the grave, then filling in the grave. Here is a link to a video about home funerals: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaVJfJsflP0>.

Is this legal?

Yes. In Michigan, the law mandates that a licensed funeral director sign the death certificate and supervise transport to the final disposition of the body (crematory or cemetery). There is no law against you providing care for the body in the home, however, since most of us don't have experience caring for bodies, you might

want to enlist the help of someone who does, including your funeral director. Please see afterdeathhomecare.com and homefuneralalliance.org for more information.

It is also important to know that most health care facilities will not release the body into the care of the family. This is not a law but a facility regulation; you may need to contract a funeral home to transport the body to your home.

Cemeteries, including green cemeteries, may have their own regulations about graveside family participation based on liability issues. Again, it's hard to overstate the importance of planning ahead. Please see our [Green Burial planner](#).

How can I learn more about natural (green) burial?

Please check out our [Links and Documents](#) page for a list of websites, online videos, online documents, books, and movies. You can also visit the Green Burial Council website greenburialcouncil.org. This is an organization that creates standards and benchmarks for members of the funeral services industry offering “green” alternatives. Those organizations meeting their standards can receive certification and approved provider status.