

## April 2021 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

### Washington State's Greener Method of Burial

Washington was the first state in the nation to legalize composting (as of 2019) as an alternative to burying or cremating human remains, offering "natural organic reduction" including composting. "Pegged as a greener method of burial than caskets or cremation, supporters say the option could find a foothold in the \$20 billion funeral industry." "The law passed with wide bipartisan support. The bill faced some opposition by funeral directors who worried how it would be implemented but had the legislature's approval. The vote was 80-16 in the House, and 38-11 in the Senate. The Roman Catholic Church was among the opposition." Supporters suggest human composting is more affordable and environmentally friendly than caskets or cremation. The company, ReCompose, located in Kent, pioneered human composting and opened for business in December 2020. Composting is an alternative to casket burial or cremation. The cost is estimated at \$5,500, more than typical cremation, but less than a traditional casket burial. Starting in May 2020, recomposition was allowed at Washington's crematories. The final remains can be buried in "scattering gardens" in cemeteries or other locations by permit. The bill also legalized a method called alkaline hydrolysis, which uses heat, pressure, water and base chemical agents to reduce remains.

"Green Funerals" is the process of mixing human remains with straw and wood chips and placing them in soil to help grow flowers and trees. "What we call green burial today would have been known as traditional burial for all of human history up until the 20th century. In green burial, the deceased is not embalmed with toxic chemicals. Instead, the body is either left in its natural state or embalmed with non-toxic, formaldehyde-free fluids. Only biodegradable materials are used, such as natural-fiber shrouds and caskets made of pine, wicker, bamboo, or paper. There is no concrete vault or liner placed around the casket, so the body is in direct contact with the earth." One of the differences between composting and cremation is no toxic substances such as mercury from dental fillings occur with composting. In simple terms, a green funeral is a burial with the lowest environmental impact possible.

Traditional burial practices often involve embalming (preserving) the body prior to an open casket viewing. The embalming process drains bodily fluids and replaces them with chemical solutions that slow the decomposition of tissue. In a green burial, the body is not embalmed. It can be preserved in a chilled environment until a public or private viewing (if desired), then buried in a biodegradable coffin or shroud. Graves tend to be dug to a shallower depth, without a cement liner or vault. The goal of green burial is to allow the body to return to the earth through natural decomposition using a minimal amount of earth-friendly materials in the process. Natural materials prevent contamination of the soil from any synthetic, toxic, or non-degradable materials. As far as the earth is concerned, the less contamination, the better.

Green (Non-burial) Options: If green burial is not available, other ways to lighten one's final footprint:

Cremation: Consumes energy and releases airborne pollutants but can be an efficient choice in some cases.

"Flameless" or aqua cremation: (formally known as alkaline hydrolysis) is a smoke-free cremation option.

Seedling urn: Cremated remains are placed in a biodegradable container that will decompose when buried in the soil. A tree sapling is planted above to be nourished by the cremated remains.

Memorial remains: cremated remains are mixed with concrete and create an artificial reef to support marine life.

Burial at sea: As long as regulations are followed, full body burial at sea is a viable and sustainable option.

Find answers to following questions by clicking on question: [How do I get a death certificate in Washington?](#) [Who can order a death certificate in Washington?](#) [In Washington, who completes the death certificate?](#) [Is embalming required in Washington?](#) [In Washington, is a casket necessary for burial or cremation?](#) [In Washington, do I have to buy a casket from the funeral home?](#) [Where can bodies be buried in Washington?](#) [Where can we store or scatter ashes after cremation in Washington?](#)

**Sources:** [Recompose, the first human-composting funeral home in the U.S., is now open for business | The Seattle Times](#)  
<https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/burial-cremation-laws-washington.html#7>  
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