

Green Burial in Westford

General Information and Guidelines

The Westford Cemetery Department offers the option for “green” or natural burial in a designated section at Pine Grove Cemetery. In a natural burial, a deceased person’s body is not embalmed, and is laid to rest in a biodegradable shroud or casket. The grave is 3-4 feet deep, and no grave liner or vault is used or permitted. Graves are mounded and allowed to settle, and the native flora is maintained or restored. This section will be mown and landscaped somewhat differently than the rest of the cemetery, creating a more naturalistic appearance.

While today green burial may be considered a relatively new practice in the United States, nearly all burials were natural prior to the Civil War. Many people now choose green burial as a sustainable way of caring for the dead, as it promotes efficient decomposition, nourishes the soil, conserves natural resources, reduces carbon emissions, and restores and preserves native habitat. Some people choose natural burial for religious reasons. Others desire to reduce burial costs by making or purchasing a simple shroud or casket, and forgoing the purchase of embalming services and a grave liner or vault. To learn more about green burial, visit the Green Burial Massachusetts website: <https://greenburialma.org/>

We offer the following guidelines for choosing a natural burial in Westford to help you plan ahead.

Choosing a Green Burial Lot

A green burial section at Pine Grove Cemetery has been developed with 148 lots. Please make an appointment with the Cemetery Department to view the site and purchase the lot(s) of your choice.

A printable price structure and information on “Burial Fees, Rights and Services” can be found on the Cemetery Department webpage on the Town website: <https://westfordma.gov/1055/Cemetery-Department>.

Requests for green burials outside the green burial section will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Home Funerals and Conventional Funeral Home Options

Green burial is compatible with a myriad of funerary customs. Some people choose to hire a funeral director who is knowledgeable about green burial to prepare their loved one’s body and hold a service in a conventional funeral home.

Others choose a “home funeral” (also called a “home vigil” or “home wake”), in which the body of the deceased is kept at home – typically for 1-3 days – allowing family members and friends to gather and grieve together in a comfortable environment. Families who opt for home funerals may choose to take on the role of a funeral director, including preparing the body for vigil and burial, coordination of legal paperwork, obtaining the burial permit, holding a service, arranging the burial with the Cemetery Department, and transporting the body. A home funeral guide can assist families with this option. Some funeral directors are also willing to assist with a home funeral or assist with certain aspects while the family handles others. For example, the family may wish to prepare their loved one’s body for burial and arrange a vigil in the home, while hiring a funeral director only to handle the legal paperwork and transportation.

To learn more about home funerals, visit the National Home Funeral Alliance website:
<https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>

To learn more about working without a funeral director, visit the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Eastern Massachusetts website: <https://fcaemass.org/resources/caring-for-your-own-dead/>

Whether you opt for a home funeral or a more conventional arrangement with a funeral director, all applicable state laws must be followed. Pre-planning, when possible, is always advised.

Preparing the Body for Natural Burial

Any clothing, jewelry, or adornment to be interred with the body must be made of natural, biodegradable material.

It is important to keep the body cool to slow decomposition. There are simple methods for this to be done at home, such as the use of Techni-Ice packs or a similar cooling product. Many funeral homes have onsite refrigeration or use other cooling techniques. We recommend discussing this with a home funeral guide or funeral director. Caskets and shrouds must be free of visible bodily fluids upon arrival at the cemetery.

Shrouds and Shrouding Boards

A shroud is a cloth used to wrap and cover a body after a person has died. Green burial shrouds must be made of natural, biodegradable materials such as wool, cotton, linen, bamboo, or hemp. A shrouded body may be placed inside a biodegradable casket, but a casket is not required. A shrouded body without a casket must be entirely wrapped and placed on an untreated softwood (such as white pine) or wicker shrouding board, which meets the same biodegradability requirements as caskets (see below). The board will help stabilize the body while being transported and lowered into the grave and will remain inside the grave. Plywood and particle board are not acceptable. A board with carrying handles that is at least as wide and as long as the body is recommended; please notify the Cemetery Department if a board will exceed 28-inches in width and 84-inches in length. Some shrouds have carrying handles sewn into the cloth and sleeves sewn into the bottom in which a narrower board can be inserted; the narrower board is acceptable since the body and board are held snugly together with ties, providing stability.

Caskets

Caskets may be constructed from untreated softwood, wicker, cardboard, or other natural, biodegradable materials, and must not be painted with toxic paint or varnish. They should be of sufficient strength to support the weight of the body. Wooden caskets should be held together with wooden dowels and non-toxic glues rather than metal fasteners. To minimize environmental impact, we recommend obtaining locally-made caskets. Some people prefer to make their own, using locally-sourced or repurposed materials. Handmade caskets should conform to standard casket size; please notify the Cemetery Department if an oversized casket will be required.

The Green Burial Process

One full body burial is allowed in each green burial grave.

Families or funeral directors planning a natural burial must arrange for at least six people to be present at the cemetery who can safely lift and carry the shrouded body or casket a maximum of 100 feet from

the vehicle to the gravesite. These individuals may also lower the body into the grave, if pre-arranged with the Cemetery Department; otherwise, a mechanical lowering device will be used.

Graves will be opened by cemetery personnel. Families and friends are welcome to help fill the graves after the body is lowered using shovels provided by the Cemetery Department. Personnel will complete the burial after the family departs. Cut flowers may be placed in and on top of the grave.

Perpetual Care of Natural Graves

Once a green burial grave is closed, the soil will be mounded, mulched, and allowed to settle, which could take a few weeks or several months. In keeping with green burial principals of sustainability and habitat preservation, cemetery personnel will re-seed or plant settled graves with native plant vegetation. No other plantings are allowed. Flower vases and decorations are not permitted in this section.

Memorialization

Upright headstones are not permitted on natural burial graves. Individual grave markers placed flush with the ground are permitted if desired, but not required. Markers must be flat, no larger than 2' W x 1' L, a minimum of 4" thick, and made of unpolished, locally-sourced, natural or quarried stone. Engraving of markers is permitted prior to placement. The Cemetery Department reserves the right to remove any marker that does not comply.

A Monument Permit Application must be submitted and approved by the Cemetery Department prior to placement of any marker. The monument company of your choice will have this form or it can be obtained from the Cemetery Department office or webpage [by clicking here](#).

Another option for memorialization is to have the decedent's name, year of birth, and year of death engraved on a large, granite, shared memorial stone that is situated in the natural burial area and owned by the cemetery. For more information about this option, please contact the Cemetery Department.

The **Town of Westford Regulations for Municipal Cemeteries** is available on the Westford Cemetery Department webpage [by clicking here](#) and at the Westford Cemetery Office.

Westford Cemetery Department personnel are committed to serving the community and visitors to our cemeteries. We are dedicated to maintaining and preserving our cemeteries and looking after the final resting places of our beloved departed citizens entrusted to our care. Please contact us if you need assistance, have any questions about green burials, or are interested in purchasing a green burial lot.

Westford Cemetery Department
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