

Green burial option for Catholics on its way

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TORONTO – With the opening last month of a new green burial option in the Greater Toronto Area, eco-conscious families now have more choices for burying their loved ones.

It's just that it's not an option — yet — at a Catholic cemetery.

When Meadowvale Cemetery opened its green burial section in Brampton, Ont., in June, it was the first of its kind in the GTA. But it won't be too long before Catholic Cemeteries — Archdiocese of Toronto follows suit.

"We are planning and learning more about this type of burial option," said Amy Profenna, manager, marketing and public relations for Catholic Cemeteries.

"It allows eco-conscious Catholic families a section in the cemetery that will accommodate their burial preferences."

It will be another five years before Catholic Cemeteries opens Guardian Angels Cemetery, which will include a natural burial section, in Brampton, said Profenna.

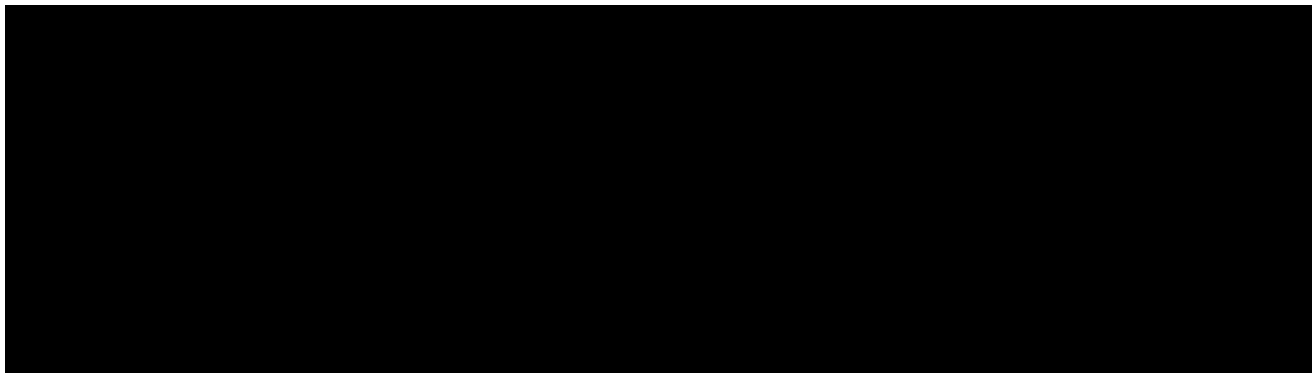
A green, or natural, burial restricts the use of environmentally harmful preservatives such as formaldehyde, although embalming can still occur if eco-friendly products like AARDBalm are used. AARDBalm is a line of non-toxic, iodine-based embalming and disinfecting products.

EILEEN FITZPATRICK, PRESIDENT OF CANADIAN MEMORIAL SERVICES WHO PROVIDE FUNERAL OPERATIONS WITH THE MOUNT PLEASANT GROUP OF CEMETERIES, SPEAKS ABOUT GREEN EMBALMING.



This is the green burial area of Meadowvale Cemetery in Brampton, Ont., the first of its kind in the Greater Toronto Area. Catholics will soon be able to access the green burial option when Catholic Cemeteries — Archdiocese of Toronto opens Guardian Angels Cemetery, also in Brampton, in about five years time.

- Photo courtesy of Louise Winton



A deceased's remains, either body or ashes, are not permitted in green burial cemeteries if they are in a "Cadillac" casket or urn. Only remains enclosed in biodegradable materials, such as unvarnished pine, will be lowered into the ground. Shrouds containing non-toxic dyes will also be accepted as an appropriate covering for the deceased.

"Burials will be different than traditional burials in terms of not using a vault or placing monuments and concrete

foundations,” said Profenna.

While Meadowvale Cemetery is the first of its kind in the GTA, and believed to be only the third in Canada, green burials have legally taken place in the United Kingdom for more than 20 years. They’ve also grown in popularity south of the border over the past decade.

But here in Canada demand has yet to spike.

“To date we have no significant enquiries for green burials from the bereaved families we serve,” said Profenna. “However, we expect in the future there will be demand for this type of green burial product.”

It’s an avenue that respects our faith more than the contemporary, or “traditional,” methods of burial, said Dennis O’Hara, professor of ethics and eco-theology at Toronto’s University of St. Michael’s College.

“When you think about it, we consider our cemeteries to be sacred sites and if we consider them to be sacred sites then why would we want to contaminate the ground with things like formaldehyde?” said O’Hara, who is also director of the Elliott Allen Institute for Theology and Ecology at St. Michael’s.

“Why wouldn’t we want to keep these grounds as pristine as possible?”

He also noted that what is popularly perceived as a “traditional burial,” that which involves formaldehyde, only became popular for average citizens following the American Civil War.

History aside, keeping it pristine is the goal for Meadowvale’s half-acre all-natural site containing 255 plots which can accommodate one body plus a cremation or two biodegradable urns.

Grass at the site will remain untamed, aside from a few access routes, as it grows amid indigenous wild flowers.

Tombstones are prohibited from the area, although sites will be marked by a small, standardized number plate to ensure staff are able to accurately locate each resident.

But that doesn’t mean there will be a price break as adult plots cost \$1,800 in either section of the cemetery.

“It all kind of works out to be about the same amount of work, it’s just a differ kind of work,” said Rick Cowan, a spokesperson with Mount Pleasant Group of Cemeteries, which owns Meadowvale Cemetery.

“There are other things that we would have to do and when it comes to how we handle that section we have to be more careful.”

Profenna said Catholic Cemeteries is looking at a potential second location within the existing Christ the King Cemetery in Markham, Ont., if demand increases.

“Adapting to change and responding to our families’ demands is important,” said Profenna.

“If the demand is there we will respond.”