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## How to keep the burial process lean and green

Your final exit from this mortal coil can also be green with a natural burial.

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SUPPLIED PHOTO

One of Cobourg Union Cemetery's funeral home partners, MacCoubrey Funeral Home in Cobourg, offers this eco-friendly container made in Lindsay from sustainably-forested poplar. It costs \$550.

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**By:** Valerie Hauch Staff Reporter, Published on Tue Oct 18 2011

She's only 25 and in good health, but Courtney Heron-Monk has already given much thought to her burial plans. When she leaves this mortal coil, she'll have a natural interment — no fancy casket with varnished wood costing thousands of dollars, no concrete vault or embalming fluids which eventually leak into the soil, no cremation which uses a lot of fuel and releases gases into the air.

As general manager of the Toronto-based [Natural Burial Association](#) — a non-profit which promotes the establishment of natural burial grounds as a land use planning tool to create, protect and link natural spaces — Heron-Monk is an expert in eco-friendly alternatives to the conventional burial. She says the NBA's goal is not to put an end to conventional burial and cremation practices but to draw attention to natural burial as a sustainable option and educate the public.

Currently, there is no non-denominational natural burial site in the GTA although Heron-Monk is aware of one in the planning stages, but can't reveal where it will be.

There is one in B.C. and at the historic [Cobourg Union Cemetery](#) which has traditional interments but opened a natural burial area in 2009, the principle being that everything will be "biodegradable," says superintendent Michel Cabardos. Instead of trying to forestall decomposition, natural burial allows it to happen as quickly as nature intended.

That means bodies cannot be embalmed and will be buried in biodegradable shrouds or plain wood caskets with only wooden dowels used as fasteners. The natural burial area is a meadow overlooking a creek and the only markers allowed are modest, native shrubs, perhaps a blueberry bush or wild

flowers, or possibly a rock unearthed during the grave digging which can be engraved. The cemetery has a site map to indicate where people are buried.

People can have any sort of graveside service they want, says Cabardos. “One family had a picnic there. We had one dog attend a funeral. For the people who come here, it’s important that they’re in a beautiful meadow. I think a cemetery should be like a park. It’s open year round and people can come and walk here anytime.”

Canada’s a bit late coming to natural burials, which started in 1993 in the United Kingdom where there are more than 200 sites. The U.S. has about 20, with more under development.

The historic nature of cemeteries has always drawn Heron-Monk’s interest, even as a young girl. An urban planner, she got involved with the Natural Burial Association after writing her master’s thesis on the role that natural burial grounds could play in preserving woodlands within Ontario’s Green Belt.

As a result, she became aware of some fascinating facts: The average adult requires roughly 16 litres of embalming fluid. According to the Ontario Funeral Services Board, 61,192 Ontarians were embalmed in 2009, requiring 900,900 litres of formaldehyde — a known carcinogen — which eventually ended up in the soil.

Casket manufacturers are listed among the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s top 50 hazardous waste generators because of chemicals, such as methyl and xylene, used in the exterior spray finish.

That said, the few studies done to date on the effects of conventional burial on soil and groundwater have conflicting conclusions

Cremation doesn’t take up space in the ground and is growing in popularity, but how eco-friendly is it? About 27 litres of natural gas are used to cremate one body, according to the NBA.

There are also questionable air emissions from cremation. Even though modern crematoria use smoke stack “scrubbers,” they can’t get everything.

According to the United Nations, crematoria contribute 0.2 per cent of the global emission of dioxins and furans and are blamed for being the second largest source of airborne mercury in Europe.

Ann Lacombe, a 58-year-old Toronto early childhood educator, considered all the aspects of conventional burial and cremation before deciding on a natural burial at Cobourg Union Cemetery.

She’s already been to one burial there and found it a peaceful, lovely experience. She also likes the eco-friendly aspect of the site. “I’m not a lunatic about green, but if there is a green option, I’ll take it.”

### **Green burial plot**

The price for a green burial plot at Cobourg Union Cemetery is \$1,200, with an additional \$750 for opening and closing the grave. There are no concrete liners. The cemetery has sold 30 plots out of a total 181 available in the natural burial area. There have been 11 burials since the natural burial area opened in 2009. The cemetery has partnered with a number of funeral homes, including a few in Toronto, which are aware of the sort of biodegradable casket or shroud that’s allowed at the site. All funeral home service costs are extra.

