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## GTA's first natural burial site opens in Brampton

The GTA's first natural burial site opens Monday. While the practice has become widespread in Europe, it's only beginning to catch on in North America, and Meadowvale's half-acre site is only the third official natural burial place in Canada.



STEVE RUSSELL / TORONTO STAR

You'll find little more than natural grass and indigenous flowers in the natural burial section of Meadowvale cemetery in Brampton. The goal is to keep the site "pristine."

**By:** Wendy Gillis and Anita Li Staff Reporter, Published on Sun Jun 10 2012

You've heard of greening your life. But an increasing number of people are now planning to be eco-conscious even in death.

Called natural burial, the eco-friendly final resting place is a plot of land in a field, and little else. No chemical embalming process, no lacquered casket, and in some cases, not even a tombstone.

"The underlying principal reason is to allow the human remains to return to the earth as naturally as possible," said Rick Cowan, spokesperson with Mount Pleasant Group of Cemeteries.

On Monday, the company's Brampton cemetery, Meadowvale, opens the GTA's first natural burial site.

While the practice has become widespread in Europe — the first site opened in the UK 20 years ago — it's only beginning to catch on in North America. Meadowvale's half-acre site is believed to be the third official natural burial place in Canada.

Not all sites agree on what constitutes a natural burial. It's up to each cemetery to make decisions about, for instance, what types of materials can be used to contain the body, said Cowan.

Mount Pleasant Group took two years to draft its rules. Among them: a casket can be used, provided it's made of biodegradable materials and not treated with varnish. Embalming can take place, so long as it's not done with formaldehyde or other, non-biodegradable chemicals.

While cremation is frowned upon by some environmental groups — the process uses about 27 litres of natural gas per body, according to the [Natural Burial Association](#) — it will be allowed at Meadowvale, though the container is required to be biodegradable.

What won't be permitted are tombstones. The cemetery wants the plot to remain "pristine," Cowan said, and other than narrow pathways down to grave locations, the natural grass and indigenous flowers they have planted will not be cut. Graves will be identified only with a small numbered marker in the grass.

In place of tombstones, the cemetery has installed four granite obelisks where names can be inscribed.

It's not known what type of demand there will be for the burial, Cowan said. Given its stripped down nature, you might assume the eco-friendly option is also the cheaper one, but that's not the case.

The price of natural and traditional interments is comparable, Cowan said, because the same work has to be done to prepare the plot.

"In some sense this is sticking our toe in the water to see whether or not there's a segment of the population that truly would like to have this type of opportunity," he said.

If the demand turns out to be there, Mount Pleasant Group will dedicate more natural burial space at its other cemeteries, Cowan said.

Ryan McEachnie, funeral director at Toronto's Aftercare Cremation and Burial Service, said that while more funeral homes are offering green products and services, interest in natural burials has actually waned in recent years, in his experience. After the economy tanked in the late 2000s, "the environmental considerations took a back seat," he said.

"The past few years, anyway, there's been much more concern with the basic bottom line cost."

There are two other non-denominational natural burial sites in Canada: one in British Columbia, and one at the Cobourg Union Cemetery.