Green Burial Roundtable

With an increasing number of people becoming interested in environmentally-friendly lifestyles, it should come as no surprise that people are also interested in choosing greener burial options for themselves and their loved ones. Sara Brink, steward of Foxfield Preserve in Wilmot, Ohio; Brian Flowers, president of the Green Burial Council; and Jennifer Johnson, burial coordinator at Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve in Newfield, N.Y., weigh in on green and natural burial.

In your experience, how have expectations or demands for green burials changed over the years?

Brink: We have seen interest increasing each year as awareness of our services grows within our community. As our community becomes more informed, they are coming to us with clear expectations in line with our services.

Flowers: I don’t think they’ve changed qualitatively, but quantitatively, it’s definitely increased. The people that expect and make demands of green burial are usually very educated, very savvy, well-researched individuals who have done their homework and are approaching us with very specific desires and needs, and I’ve seen that grow. However, initially, it was just the educated and savvy person approaching this, but I’m also seeing an increase in people who don’t know as much about green burial but want more information. Occasionally I see people making at-need arrangements, which I never saw before.

Johnson: Our cemetery preserve opened in May 2006. Each year since then we have had an increased number of burials, as well as inquiries about natural burial and a good number of people planning ahead by pre-purchasing burial sites. As awareness increases, and people choose this option, they seek out green cemeteries. Early on we buried more people from out of state than we currently do. That’s because there weren’t that many green cemeteries in 2006. Now there are quite a few more options for green burial across the states, and people can be buried closer to home.
For cemeterians wishing to “go green,” what would you suggest they do?

Brink: A great place to start is with the Green Burial Council (greenburialcouncil.org). It is establishing standards for certification with the input of conservationists and practitioners. There are also a few established green cemeteries, like Foxfield, which are offering consultation services for those who are interested.

Flowers: Begin with a call to the Green Burial Council – we’re there ready to help, guide and shepherd you through the process to whatever level you would like. Also make contacts with local folks, like biologists and restoration ecologists that can help out on the grounds as well.

Johnson: Most importantly, I would suggest that they contact their state division of cemeteries and find out what the rules and regulations are for starting a green cemetery. Then set aside a lot of time and some money to get things up and running. It took us several years. We were the first in the Northeast. New York state did not have any green/natural cemeteries, so the people at the state level worked with us and our vision to help us develop guidelines, rules, etc. Then roll up your sleeves and begin!

What about green burial do you find is most appealing or attractive to the customers you serve?

Brink: Many of our families have referred to the spirituality of a natural burial. The idea of truly returning to the earth and embracing the natural cycle of life gives them a sense of peace. I have had many people tell me that “dust to dust” rings very truly for them at a natural interment. Our families also embrace the simplicity of a natural burial, finding it more suiting to their loved one. Uniquely with Foxfield Preserve, all the proceeds of their burial purchase support nature education and conservation efforts in our community. In this way, people are bringing about something positive in their loss, and this gives many a deep sense of comfort.

Flowers: Of course, the environmental benefits, and the fact that there is an option for their remains that is in harmony with the way these people lived their lives, but really that environmental benefit is secondary to them. First, they have to trust that the environmental benefit and the promise the cemetery is making is being upheld, and that’s where the Green Burial Council comes in. Once they can trust that, they’re free to engage in unique, meaning-making opportunities. These people are dealing with difficult emotions and grief, and they sometimes want to do things like have a wake at home – a home vigil with someone laid out, unembalmed, using dry ice. Or when they can close the graves themselves, by hand, and plant native plants over the gravesite, knowing their loved one is going to nourish those plants – those are unique opportunities to find meaning out of death, and that has the most appeal or attraction to folks once they know and trust that the environmental benefits are going to be upheld.

Johnson: It is refreshing! It’s the natural setting that is so appealing. I’ve heard so often at graveside ceremonies when people reflect and tell stories about their loved ones, that the person who is being buried was an avid outdoor person; a lover of nature. Some were hikers, bird watchers, hunters, farmers, dancers, musicians, singers, ecologists, professors, doctors, environmentalists; people from all walks of life. There are people from several different religions buried there as well as people who claim no particular religion but are spiritual. They had in common a love and respect for nature and the outdoors. Many of these people lived environmentally conscious lives, and for that reason they wanted to give back to the Earth at the time of their death. Green burial is the ultimate recycling one can participate in. And by doing so, those who choose it are part of a lasting legacy of stewardship of the land and saving natural habitat forever.

Where do you see the future of green burial and green cemeteries going?

Brink: I see the popularity of natural burial increasing in the future. The baby boomer generation is environmentally minded and has always been comfortable breaking with tradition. As they begin to make their arrangements, it stands to reason that they will lead a shift to more alternative burial methods. In fact, with more people becoming interested in the environmental impact of the choices they make, I believe this cultural shift will impact decisions relating to our burial arrangements for the foreseeable future.

Flowers: It is growing. I’ve seen it grow incredibly over the last six years, and what I see happening is more existing conventional cemeteries are opening up green burial sections, because they have the heritage and revenue to build on. They wait for interest to build. I also see more families requesting green burial from local funeral providers and cemeteries, so I see it being a consumer-driven growth.

Johnson: Green burial is the way to go. Its future is bright. It brings a new perspective on death and dying. Now we see so many green cemeteries, conservation cemeteries and hybrid green cemeteries popping up all across the United States. That’s a sign that this is a growing movement, well on its way – after all it is the traditional way, and tradition carries on. Save a forest – plant yourself!