

Making Ripples

Green Cemeteries

by Amanda Bancroft

We often talk about green living, but seldom mention green dying. Death is a curiously natural part of life, and yet the conventional funeral process creates a separation between our bodies and the earth which is quite unnatural. Halloween is a popular time to dress in costume, and typically involves graveyard imagery. One local organization is seeking to re-imagine that graveyard scene, and extend sustainability from life to death.

According to founder and director Vicki Kelley, "The mission of the Natural State Burial Association is to provide environmentally-sound burial and diverse memorial options through the founding and operating of cemeteries designed to conserve natural landscape." Kelley, who began working on establishing a green cemetery three years ago, explains that "green" and "natural" burial can be used interchangeably since they both mean the same thing. "Green burial is traditional burial (think great-grandparents, pioneers, pre-civil war). Conventional burial is the product of today's funeral industry."

Kelley initially began talking to anyone curious about green burials, and found several people interested in helping establish a green cemetery. "We have now evolved into an incorporated organization, applied for non-profit status, changed the name to Natural State Burial Association, and have been offered a parcel of land to develop as a natural cemetery," Kelley says.

A natural cemetery does not permit the use of chemicals, herbicides, or pesticides. There is no embalming procedure, just a simple biodegradable burial container made of cloth, wicker, cardboard, or perhaps pine. Even though the cemetery is diligently cared for, our modern-day turf lawns are not involved. Instead, families are encouraged to plant native flowers, shrubs and trees that welcome our indigenous species and create a thriving native ecosystem.

The Green Burial Council has three levels of certification for green cemeteries: Hybrid, Natural, and Conservation, each with increasing standards. There are 107 green cemeteries here in the U.S., and 48 of those are endorsed by the Green Burial Council. Arkansas has none. But that's not because it's illegal. Surprisingly, embalming is rarely required by law and does not serve the public health, according to the CDC. Caskets are also not required by law.

Within a green cemetery, there are no markers or monuments for gravesites, which rely on GPS coordinates to be found by visitors. The setting is completely natural, embracing the cycle of life. Kelley says that green burial is a final statement of support for environmental responsibility, and our own bodies are "the last thing you get a chance to 'recycle'."

There will be a Day of the Dead party and silent auction on Sunday, November 1st at Greenhouse Grille. Doors open at 5:00pm. The party includes live music and food from local restaurants. Tickets are \$10 at the door unless you show up in costume, then they are \$8.

For more information, contact Vicki Kelley at (479) 879-2854. Visit their website at NaturalStateBurialAssociation.org or find them on Facebook under Natural State Burial Association.

Amanda Bancroft is a Master Naturalist and volunteers with her husband Ryan for their solar-powered online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.