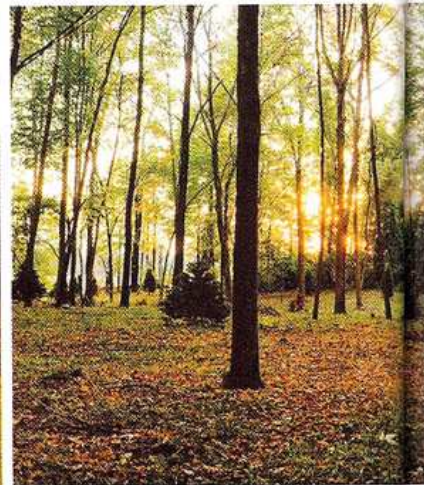
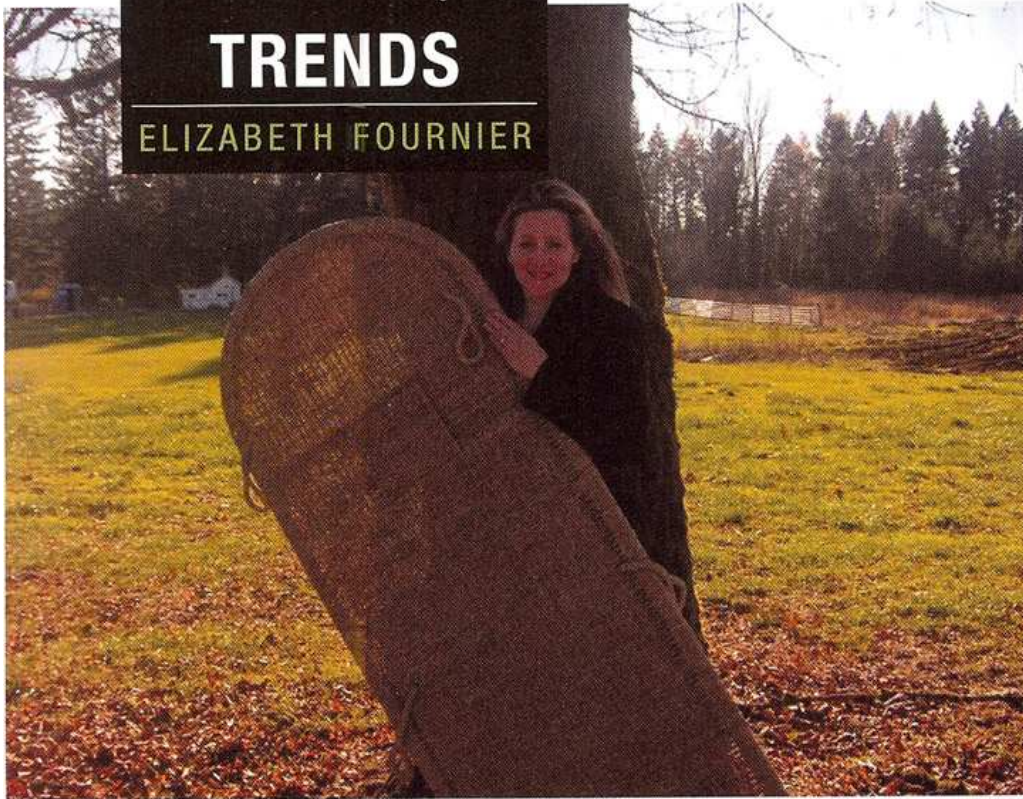


TRENDS

ELIZABETH FOURNIER



Backyard Burials

Various natural burial options are increasingly popular due to a collective, heightened consciousness. People aren't interested so much in how they will be remembered, but rather how they can continue to give back – even in death. Home funerals and natural burial practices (also referred to as green burials) are replacing the traditional funeral practices that dominated the 20th century.

Backyard burials are making their way back out of the shadows. Why the trend toward home burial? In the existing economy, the universally quoted \$6,000 for an average American funeral can be outrageous compared with the few hundred dollars it costs to hold a home funeral and burial.

Aside from the financial savings involved, home burials offer a range of personal benefits. One can visit their loved ones whenever they wish, they can landscape around the grave as desired, and they can select any grave marker desired. Backyard burials are usually more often visited, frequently

maintained and lovingly tended.

A couple years back I met a group of gentle people at their favorite pub for a funeral arrangement. Wanda's friends were stumped that I couldn't list "Wanderer" as her occupation, and "The Earth" as the accompanying industry on her death certificate. After all, this is what she was and what she did. Her friends felt they could only truly honor Wanda the Wanderer by laying her to rest on the 15 country acres where she lived. So I made some calls, confirmed with the Clackamas County Land Planning and Zoning Department regarding home burial regulations, lined up a backhoe and we

were set.

Wanda's funeral service was top drawer. Wanda's friends and family played drums, chanted and spoke of her kindness. We all held

hands to form a circle around her newly dug resting place, and stood in silence as her three sons lowered her gently into the ground. Her tiny frame was cloaked with a quilt she had made as a teenager. Soon the plain grave was covered with earth, with a knoll of dirt on top to compensate for settling that will happen over time. There was no marker, just native foliage. After a closing prayer we feasted on fish caught in the local Clackamas River.

This beautiful experience opened my eyes to the fact that burying loved ones at home can help people through the grieving process by adding an immense amount of joy in caring for the body of



their loved one on their terms. This intimate time for the family allows privacy in saying goodbye, and it also provides a convenient place to visit their beloved.

Another family I served found backyard burial to be their choice solely based on cost. Their daughter had passed away unexpectedly and money was extremely tight. They chose to place her in a hand-dug hole in front of her favorite birch tree, inside a sleeping bag. The family hashed out practical matters for a week. They wanted to make sure that her body, buried at a mere 18 inches underground (the legal limit for that specific county), wouldn't be at risk of being dug up by bears, wolves and dogs.

No one may dispose of human remains without a death certificate being filed with the local county registrar of births and deaths and a disposition permit obtained from the same office. The permit will specify the proposed location of burial. But many states are silent on this issue of home burial. I always encourage funeral directors to check local zoning laws before promising the family anything. It

is usually legal in most states to bury bodies on private land in rural or semirural areas, though there are often rules specifying how far the grave must be from the nearest home or property line (usually something around 250 feet). Also, special attention needs to be paid to make sure the burial steers clear of a stream draining into any portion of a water supply.

My suggestion is to check with the local sewage enforcement office as to the distance a septic system must be from a well and apply similar distance between the well and the gravesite. Awareness is obviously quite important to keep the body from spreading any disease organism or radioactivity that would affect the water supply or other atmosphere in the region of the gravesite.

Local zoning laws typically ban private-land burials in urban and suburban areas. Families have phoned me with interest of a backyard burial in

their subdivisions within city limits. Common sense says burial grounds should only be allowed by the local government in circumstances where sufficient acreage is available to support these boundaries, yet this needs to be explained gingerly to a family who is serious about their request.

But what happens in cases where the county doesn't seem to have formal regulations in place? This was the situation that arose in Stevenson, Ala. A man named Jim Davis buried his deceased wife in their yard next to the house he built for her. Davis said it was the last promise he could keep to her.

While Stevenson doesn't have any city laws, the state of Alabama does require certain things to happen by Jackson County Health Officials, the county where the burial took place. A site inspection needs to be performed regarding groundwater concerns. Apparently it was up to the Stevenson City Council to decide, although it is

Photos (from left to right): 1) Elizabeth Fournier holding a seagrass casket from Natural Burial Company, Eugene, Ore. 2) Sunrise through a wooded, natural burial site. 3) A backyard burial in progress. 4) Varied memorialization to suit individual family members. 5) Elizabeth Fournier assisting during a green burial service. 6) Perpetual stewardship of the land.

uncommon to have a family cemetery in the front yard of a home within a city. The council came back with an unsatisfactory answer for Davis: They said no. Their reasoning? The front yard burial would "cause property values to fall."

Three entities played a role in that specific home burial. I found this to be true when I was preparing for my recent interview on "Radio Green Earth." I phoned health officials in the Florida cities of Miami, Coral Gables and West Palm Beach, and the counties of Miami-Dade and Palm. Everyone on the other end of the line was quite pleasant, yet no one had any answers and kept referring me to other city,

county and state agencies. Finally, someone fessed up that there was nothing on the books. I went on the radio show talking about the concept of natural, green and home burials, but rather than discussing any laws I kept reminding listeners to check their local zoning laws.

But there are always special cases. One of the most famously celebrated home burials is Elvis Presley's home burial ground at Graceland, located within the city limits of Memphis, Tenn. This was made possible thanks to a zoning variance granted by the county board.

So what does backyard burial mean to the funeral industry?

The emerging trend of green funeral and burial services was given a voice at the 2009 Funeral Directors Convention and Expo in Atlantic City, N.J. Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council, discussed the latest in eco-friendly, postmortem preparation products and techniques, as well as environmental concerns associated with death care. He spoke on serving the emerging green funeral market, and explained what is driving this recent trend.

Sehee always says, "Allowing people to feel as though their last act on earth contributes to a positive purpose connects them in an almost religious way to this concept. It makes people's eyes sparkle."

I spoke to Sehee this summer when Toshiba had chosen me for their latest advertising campaign. I was crafting my contribution for their laptop campaign to represent green burial, so of course I called Joe. He was certain that as time goes on, green burial will become more popular, and cemeterians and funeral directors will have that much more of an incentive to participate. He said those in the industry who choose green burial will probably tend not to be motivated by money but by a desire to help the environment and connect with it in a way they never have before.

Families are gaining more control in death care. According to the Funeral Consumers Alliance, only the states of Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska and New York require that a professional funeral director assist with all burials, even those on private land. In the 44 other states and the District of Columbia, loved ones can be responsible for the body themselves. Again, the laws regarding burial on private property vary among individual cities or counties.

There are several agencies in the United States that exist with the sole purpose of helping families who wish to perform a home burial. A death midwife will help you make the proper arrangements for home burial of a body. The sole purpose of the death midwife is to make certain that any steps you may not have thought of

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