

# How to have a greener funeral

A guide to leaving a lighter carbon footprint on death

*Albany*  
Funerals

## INTRODUCTION

You don't need to be an eco-warrior to want to leave a lighter carbon footprint on this earth at the time of your death. During our lives, many of us try to do small every day things that collectively make a big difference; recycling, avoiding single-use plastics, opting for electric vehicles, minimising car and plane journeys etc, and so it seems logical that this shouldn't stop when we die.

Thinking of our impact on the environment doesn't always sit at the forefront of our minds with the trauma of bereavement and organising a funeral. At Albany Funerals, we are not radicals, and nor do we expect our customers to be, but over the years we have begun to realise just how polluting our industry is.

One single cremation uses the equivalent of power needed by an average person for an entire month. Technological innovations like mercury filtering equipment are being introduced to reduce carbon emissions, however there is still a long way to go.

Traditional burials also have negative environmental consequences. The chemicals used in the embalming process and artificial fibres and plastics can leak out and pollute the surrounding soil and waterways. Coffins use up natural resources such as wood and metal and graves are dug deeper, making the decomposition of the body anaerobic, which generates more gases. We're also running out of burial space.

This is why we've written this guide to help you make choices that are kinder to the environment, without necessarily stretching the budget, or causing any extra stress. Without dictating what you should or should not do, we hope it will offer a variety of ideas that you can pick and choose from, like an à la carte menu to reduce your impact as you leave this earth.

For example, the environmental impact of a conventional cremation or burial can be significantly reduced by avoiding certain practices such as embalming or by choosing a biodegradable coffin instead of one made of chipboard.

We are working towards normalising these practices in the funeral world but there is a long road ahead. In the meantime, if more and more people agree to make small changes, we can make a real impact.

For those who wish to go further, it will offer information and guidance on fully green funerals.



# COFFIN CHOICES

## Traditional coffins



If you want to think of a few ways to reduce your carbon footprint on departing this earth, a good place to start is your choice of coffin. If you do not want to opt for a natural coffin, and want a traditional style veneer one, have you thought about ordering it without the gold plastic handles? Each coffin for cremation comes fitted with 6 plastic handles that serve absolutely no purpose.



If you prefer handles, some coffins have wooden ones. A simple pine unvarnished coffin with pine handles is a good alternative and will usually cost around the same price as a shiny chipboard coffin with gold plastic handles. This type of coffin will have a much lower impact on the environment than one made of chipboard and is only slightly more expensive.



# Natural coffins



If you want to go a step further, you can choose a coffin made from natural materials such as bamboo, wicker or seagrass which are completely biodegradable. The materials used are carefully chosen for their sustainability as well as their low impact during harvesting and are usually Fair Trade, helping local populations to overcome poverty.

Willow coffins are often made in the UK, but they can be a little more expensive.





# Cardboard coffins





Cardboard coffins manufactured in the UK are usually made from recycled paper and wood pulp obtained from sustainable sources. They are completely biodegradable and have a 90% lower carbon emission than a standard chipboard coffin when cremated. Cardboard can be easily decorated, meaning that families can personalise them completely, without necessarily being artistic!



This can range from simply inviting people to write messages on the coffin, or sticking pictures on it, right through to artists' original masterpieces. This kind of involvement can be extremely therapeutic and help to familiarise family members with the coffin, so that seeing it will not feel as scary on the day of the funeral. They are also a lot cheaper than traditional or natural coffins.



MISSING YOU  
EVERYDAY  
AND ALWAYS



ALLOW  
LOVE  
ALWAYS

Missing you  
everyday and always





Missing you  
everyday and always



# CARE OF THE BODY

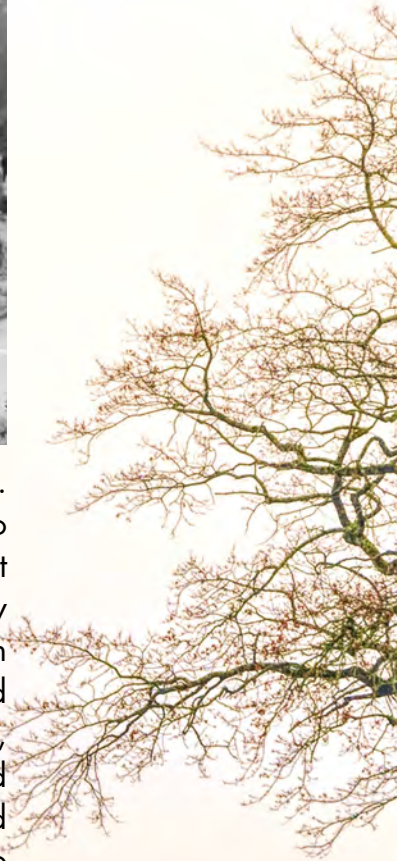


## EMBALMING

The embalming process involves draining and replacing bodily fluids with a cocktail of chemicals such as formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde, methanol and ethanol designed to preserve the body a little longer. The term 'hygienic treatment' is often used by Funeral Directors, which is misleading because it is actually quite an invasive process.



It's also hugely damaging to the environment. Up to nine litres of embalming fluid are used to embalm a body, and a large proportion of that is formaldehyde. Formaldehyde is extremely toxic and is now listed by the World Health Organisation as carcinogenic to animals and humans. When an embalmed body is buried, these toxic chemicals gradually seep into and contaminate the soil and underground waterways. An embalmed body will also release these toxins into the air when it is cremated, along with other harmful gases such as mercury and dioxin.



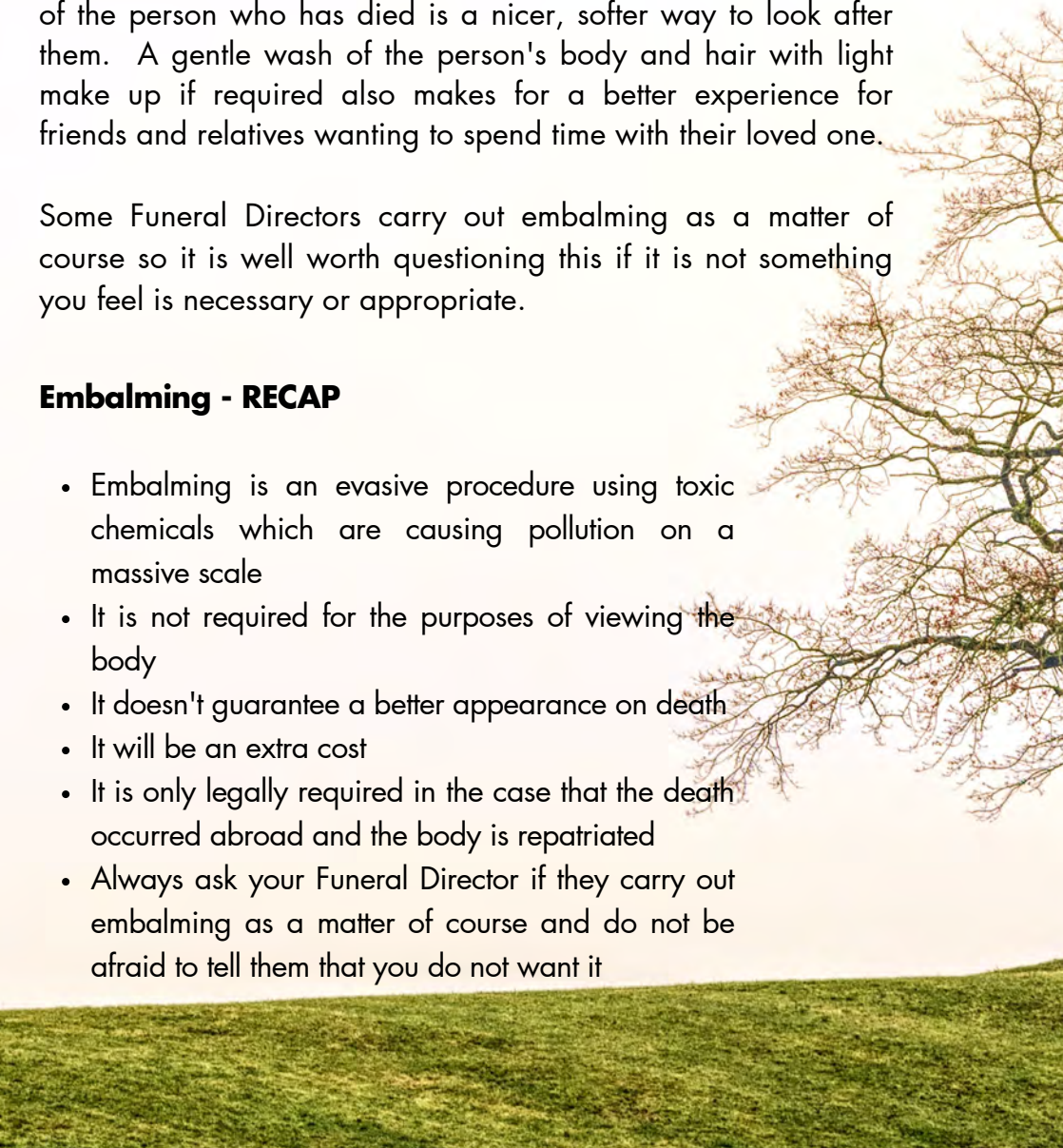
Unless there are specific circumstances such as repatriation if the death occurred abroad, when embalming is required by law, or a road traffic accident causing substantial injuries to the body, embalming is not necessary if adequate refrigeration facilities are provided.

The vast majority of our funerals do not involve any type of embalming. We believe that caring more naturally for the body of the person who has died is a nicer, softer way to look after them. A gentle wash of the person's body and hair with light make up if required also makes for a better experience for friends and relatives wanting to spend time with their loved one.

Some Funeral Directors carry out embalming as a matter of course so it is well worth questioning this if it is not something you feel is necessary or appropriate.

## **Embalming - RECAP**

- Embalming is an evasive procedure using toxic chemicals which are causing pollution on a massive scale
- It is not required for the purposes of viewing the body
- It doesn't guarantee a better appearance on death
- It will be an extra cost
- It is only legally required in the case that the death occurred abroad and the body is repatriated
- Always ask your Funeral Director if they carry out embalming as a matter of course and do not be afraid to tell them that you do not want it





## WASHING AND DRESSING OF THE PERSON

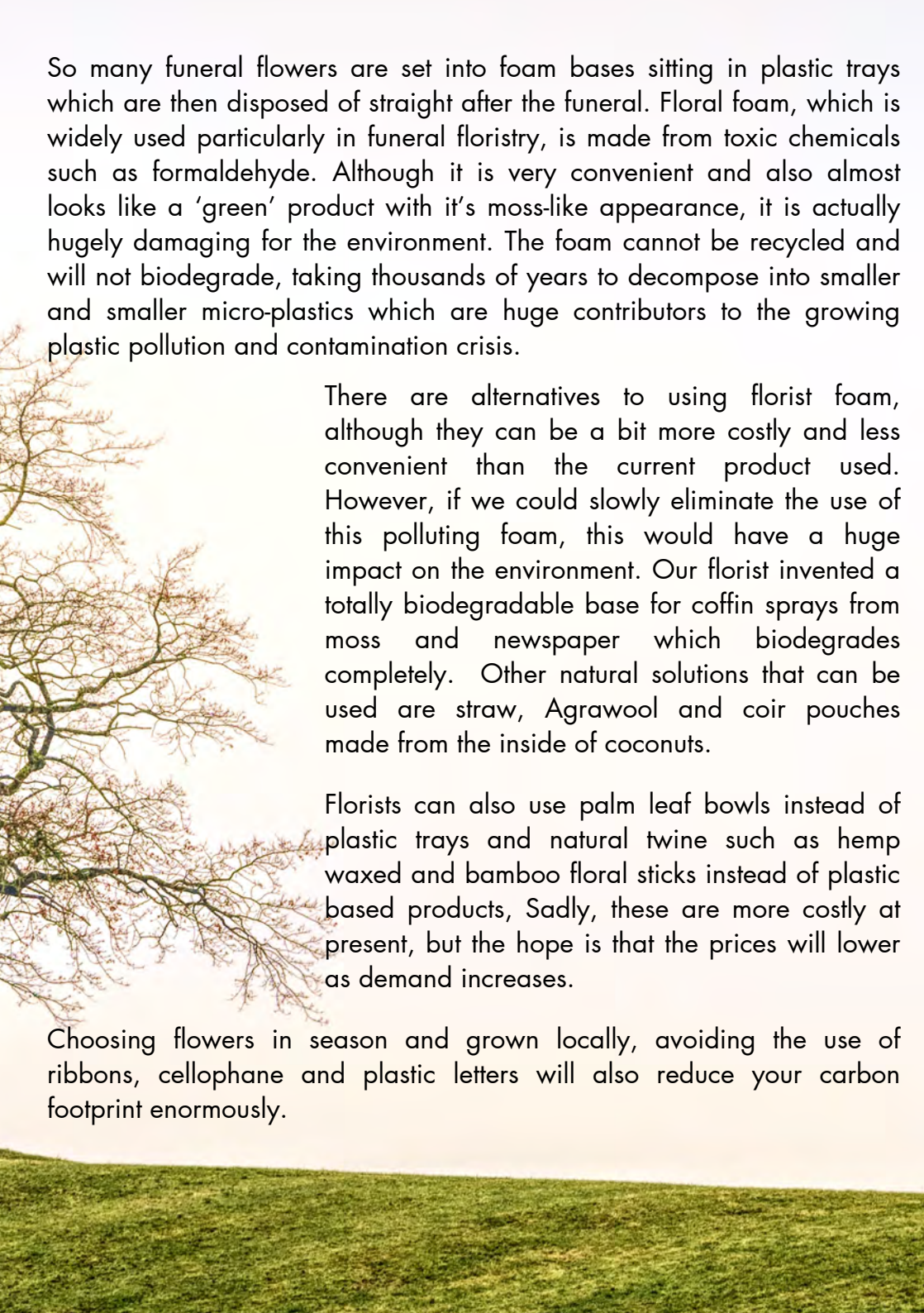
The reason we opt to dress a person in their own clothes after death is probably partly to restore their dignity if they've spent time in hospital or have been bed-bound, and partly to make them seem more like themselves and familiar to us if we want to spend some time with them after death. If this is the case, it might be worthwhile considering choosing clothes from natural fibres. Cotton, linen, hemp, wool, bamboo fibre and jute will all biodegrade naturally, whereas synthetic materials will take longer to break down and will either release toxins when burnt, or they will seep into the ground when buried. Instead of putting objects or memorabilia in the coffin with the person, think about replacing them with well loved flowers.

### **Ideas for reducing the impact of dressing a person after death on the environment**

- Choose natural clothing or opt for a familiar cotton blanket, shroud or even duvet cover to wrap the person in
- Avoid shoes with rubber soles or other items made from treated leather
- Avoid personal effects such as spectacles or anything made from plastic or man-made materials
- Ask your Funeral Director to use natural products or essential oils to wash and moisturise the body and hair of your loved one



**FLOWER  
CHOICES**

The background of the page features a lush green field in the foreground, with a tree branch bearing small, light-colored blossoms extending from the left side across the middle ground. The sky is a pale, clear blue.

So many funeral flowers are set into foam bases sitting in plastic trays which are then disposed of straight after the funeral. Floral foam, which is widely used particularly in funeral floristry, is made from toxic chemicals such as formaldehyde. Although it is very convenient and also almost looks like a 'green' product with its moss-like appearance, it is actually hugely damaging for the environment. The foam cannot be recycled and will not biodegrade, taking thousands of years to decompose into smaller and smaller micro-plastics which are huge contributors to the growing plastic pollution and contamination crisis.

There are alternatives to using florist foam, although they can be a bit more costly and less convenient than the current product used. However, if we could slowly eliminate the use of this polluting foam, this would have a huge impact on the environment. Our florist invented a totally biodegradable base for coffin sprays from moss and newspaper which biodegrades completely. Other natural solutions that can be used are straw, Agrawool and coir pouches made from the inside of coconuts.

Florists can also use palm leaf bowls instead of plastic trays and natural twine such as hemp waxed and bamboo floral sticks instead of plastic based products, Sadly, these are more costly at present, but the hope is that the prices will lower as demand increases.

Choosing flowers in season and grown locally, avoiding the use of ribbons, cellophane and plastic letters will also reduce your carbon footprint enormously.



This coffin spray is totally biodegradable with a moss and newspaper base.

# GREENER CHOICES TICK-LIST



- Chose a sustainable coffin made from, wicker, other natural materials or cardboard, without metal handles;
- Dress the body in biodegradable garments like cotton or wool;
- Prefer a natural burial site over a traditional cemetery or crematorium;
- Arrange a quick lead time for the funeral to avoid as much refrigerated storage as possible;
- Choose sustainable or local flowers and opt for natural arrangements without floral foam;
- Plant a tree in memory of your loved one instead of an imported memorial;
- Publish online or social media funeral notices instead of newspaper print advertisements;
- If you are arranging a burial, consider a green funeral or natural burial;
- If you do opt for a memorial, chose local natural stone rather than a Chinese import;
- Print memorial cards or Orders of Service on recycled paper;
- If you're arranging catering at a wake or memorial, order food that's sourced locally

# GREEN FUNERALS



If you want to take things a bit further, the most environmentally friendly way to have a funeral in this country today is to opt for a natural burial.

A natural burial, or eco burial, involves using a shallow grave with a biodegradable coffin and no permanent memorial. There are more than 360 natural burial sites in the UK, allowing someone to be buried in landscapes like woodland, meadows or orchards in a way that preserves the existing habitat.



## NATURAL BURIAL

*'Natural burial is a term used to describe the burial of human remains where the burial area creates habitat for wildlife or preserves existing habitat (woodland, species rich meadows, orchards, aquatic, sustainably managed farmland etc.) which are rich in flora and fauna.*

*Where a funeral precedes such burial, it would seek to minimise environmental impact by prohibiting embalming and, where a coffin is used, ensuring that this be made of natural, biodegradable materials.'*

'A Guide to Natural Burial'

written by **Ken West MBE**,

Founder of the first natural burial site in the UK.

Natural burial offers a real alternative to traditional practices and is suitable for people of any or no faith. There are no gravestones, which gives the space a much more warm and welcoming feel. The use of chemicals or any plastic is prohibited in the process. Natural biodegradable materials must be used for the coffin, flowers and clothes that the person is buried in so that the burial area creates a valuable habitat for wildlife rich in flora and fauna.

A good burial ground would also provide a more peaceful environment for a funeral, offering more time, space and tranquility than traditional venues. Being surrounded by nature provides solace and healing.

Native tree planting is also an integral part of the natural burial process, which provides a memorial for family and friends that will live on and grow, but also will be hugely beneficial for the environment in the future.





# KENT NATURAL BURIAL GROUNDS

## **Deerton Natural Burial Ground**

Deerton Street, Sittingbourne ME9 9LL

[www.kentnaturalburials.co.uk](http://www.kentnaturalburials.co.uk)

*This burial ground is now full unless you have already pre-purchased a grave.*

## **Riverview Natural Burial Ground**

Wardwell Lane, Lower Halstow, Sittingbourne, ME9 7BP

[www.kentnaturalburials.co.uk](http://www.kentnaturalburials.co.uk)

## **Eden Valley Woodland Burial Ground**

Crouch House Road, Edenbridge TN8 5LG

[www.edenvalleyburials.org.uk](http://www.edenvalleyburials.org.uk)



## **WOODLAND AREAS IN LOCAL TRADITIONAL CEMETERIES**

- Herne Bay Cemetery
- Otford Parish Council Cemetery, Sevenoaks
- Woodland Garden Cemetery, Bybrook, Ashford
- Canterbury City Cemetery and Whitstable Cemetery
- Chatham Cemetery

# NATURAL BURIAL TICK-LIST



- No embalming or use of any other chemicals
- The coffin must be completely biodegradable
- Absolutely no plastic or metal in or on the coffin
- The body should be dressed in natural fibres
- Graves are hand-dug and are shallower than conventional graves to allow the body to decompose faster, reducing the amount of methane the body will produce
- Trees are planted as memorials in place of headstones
- Flowers must be presented without any plastic or artificial wrapping

Conventional grave



Natural grave



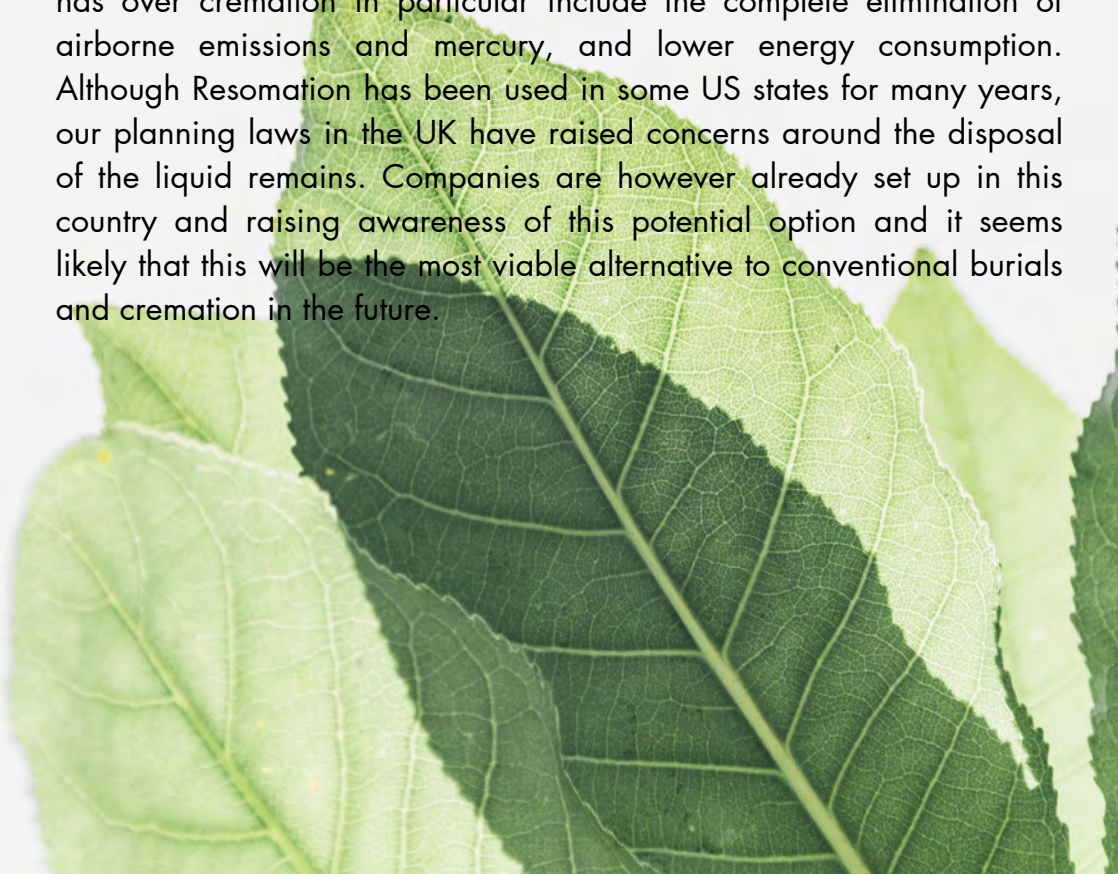
# THE FUTURE OF GREEN FUNERALS

All over the world, innovators are looking at ways to revolutionise the funeral industry and although some practices have been approved for use in the US, we are yet to embrace them in this country. Some are more likely to become the norm here in years to come than others, and the main contenders are:

## **Resomation**

Resomation is alkaline hydrolysis which uses a water-based solution to speed up the natural processes the body undergoes after death.

The body is placed in a pressure vessel which is then filled with water and potassium hydroxide and heated to 160°C in a pressurised environment. Within 4-6 hours, the body is broken down into its chemical components. It has been proven to have the lowest environmental impact of any kind of body disposal, and the benefits it has over cremation in particular include the complete elimination of airborne emissions and mercury, and lower energy consumption. Although Resomation has been used in some US states for many years, our planning laws in the UK have raised concerns around the disposal of the liquid remains. Companies are however already set up in this country and raising awareness of this potential option and it seems likely that this will be the most viable alternative to conventional burials and cremation in the future.



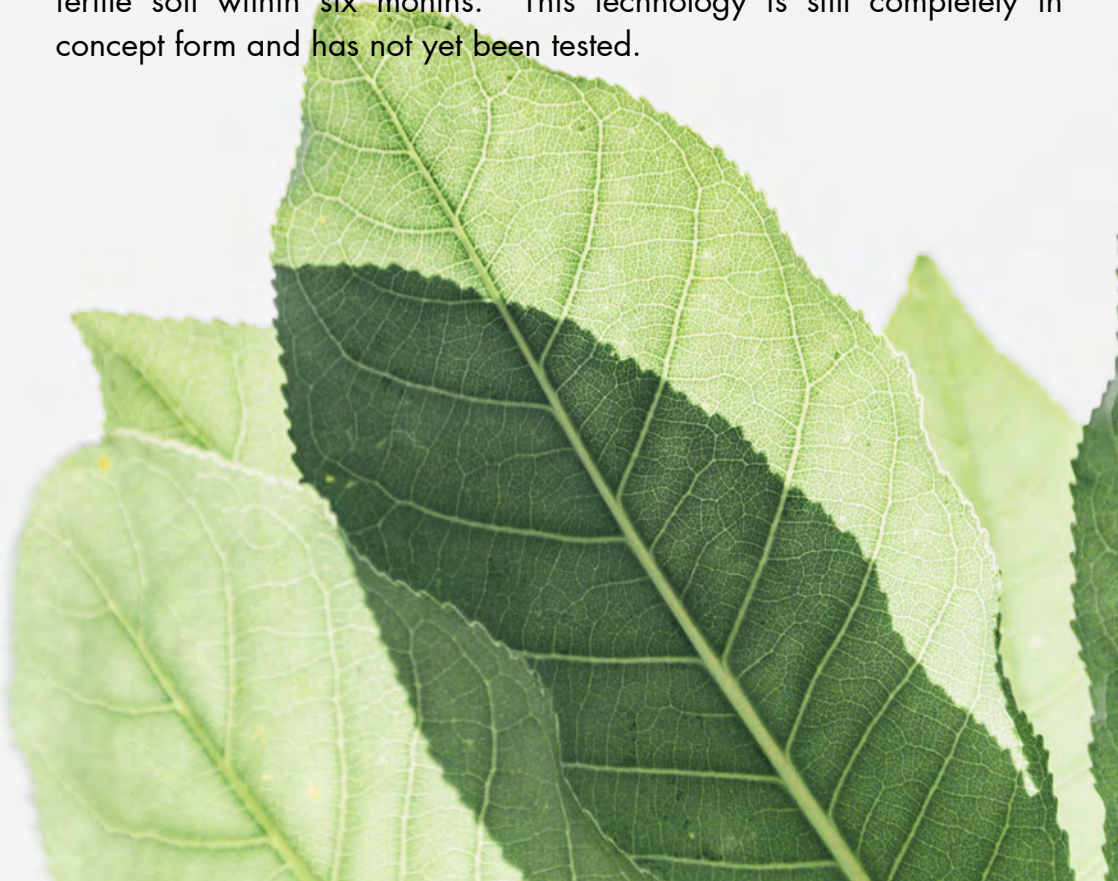
## **Human composting**

This is a new technology is being developed in the USA which involves a body being put in a metal container along with wood chips, straw and alfalfa plants. After four to six weeks loved ones are left with a pot of soil to take home, which they can use to grow flowers or a tree.

The firm Recompose claims that its human composting process saves more than a tonne of carbon compared to cremation or traditional burial. Although tests have worked well, this method has not yet been approved for use.

## **Promession**

The body is frozen to  $-196^{\circ}\text{C}$  in liquid nitrogen before being broken down into a powder through gentle vibration. This powder can then be buried inside an eco-friendly coffin, allowing the remains to become fertile soil within six months. This technology is still completely in concept form and has not yet been tested.





*Albany*  
Funerals

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