



Photo by John Gussman.

Conservation Burial Q&A

Q. What is Olympic Wildland Burial Grounds, LLC?

A. Olympic Wildland Burial Grounds (OWBG) is a wholly owned subsidiary of Jefferson Land Trust. That means it's a limited liability company with one owner, Jefferson Land Trust. OWBG is a local organization that will offer conservation burial and memorial forest options that will allow someone to remember their loved ones and conserve and restore land at the same time.

Q. What is the mission of Olympic Wildland Burial Grounds?

A. To provide a meaningful way to weave death and natural burial practices into local land restoration and stewardship.

Q. What is the vision of Olympic Wildland Burial Grounds?

A. Through our conservation burial ground and memorial forest options, we strive to restore and nurture local biodiversity while creating a serene space for honoring loved ones. Committed to fostering community connections, we aim to provide equitable access for all, ensuring that each visitor finds solace, inspiration, and a shared purpose in preserving our natural heritage for generations to come.

Q. What is conservation burial?

A. Conservation burial is a type of natural or green burial that helps preserve, enhance, and restore a natural area in conjunction with a conservation organization that guarantees the preservation of the burial ground in perpetuity.

Q. Why is Jefferson Land Trust creating conservation burial grounds?

A. Jefferson Land Trust is a private community-based nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving open space, forests, habitat, fish-bearing streams, and working farmland. Part of this work includes restoring lands that have been disturbed to improve their ecological values.

Through OWBG, the Land Trust is pursuing the creation of conservation burial grounds to:

1. Restore disturbed sites to an improved ecological condition that provides greater benefits to the people, plants, and animals of the area for generations to come, and
2. Create a natural burial option for the community that contributes to the restoration and care of a protected natural area.



Q. How are burial sites marked?

A. Burial sites will not be visibly marked, but each will have a unique GPS point, and photographs of the burial site that include permanent features will also be archived. Additionally, metal markers may be buried near the surface to allow a metal detector to locate the exact perimeter of burial sites. Native plants, including trees and shrubs, will be planted at burial sites as part of the restoration effort for the properties. Complete, permanent records of burial site locations with names and dates will be kept by OWBG.

Q. Do conservation burial grounds reuse burial plots?

A. Although some burial grounds use this practice, OWBG will not reuse burial plots at its conservation burial grounds, since this would interfere with our restoration efforts.

Q. How will the burial sites be selected?

A. The OWBG board of managers and Jefferson Land Trust staff will design a restoration plan for the selected site, in consultation with habitat biologists. Within the restoration plan, sectors of the property will be identified for initial restoration and burial activities that avoid intact habitat and wetlands.

Q. Why can't someone pick a burial site anywhere on the burial ground properties?

A. Organizing the properties into prioritized restoration zones will allow us to manage restoration of the properties according to long-term plans that will help the lands reach their greatest habitat potential.

In addition, some areas of the properties will not be suitable for burial as existing native habitat or sensitive areas could be disturbed by such activities.

Q. Does conservation burial use a regular coffin?

A. No. Conservation burial only uses biodegradable materials, for example, shrouds or unvarnished wooden caskets.

Q. How do I know that a particular product is suitable for a green burial?

A. Compostable caskets or shrouds are suitable for green burials if they're made from nontoxic and readily biodegradable materials and substances.

Q. What's required for a shroud burial? And are burial garments required?

A. A shroud burial is usually just that – a body wrapped in a biodegradable shroud lowered into a grave. While burial garments may be used, often by followers of certain religious customs, they're neither required or discouraged as a matter of course. Some shroud burials also include a casket for ease of processions and lowering.

Q. Is embalming used in conservation burial?

A. No. Because embalming fluid slows decomposition, embalming is not used in conservation burial.

Q. How will bodies be transported to the burial site?

A. We plan to use Amish carts to transport remains from parking areas to burial sites. Family and friends are welcome to assist with the transport along with a procession of loved ones.

Q. Do green burials contaminate the water table or drinking water?

A. No. With burials at 3.5 feet deep, there's no danger of contaminating potable water that's generally found at around 100 feet below the



Photo by John Gussman.

surface. Mandatory setbacks from wetlands and neighboring wells will ensure that surface and subsurface water is not at risk.

Q. How deep are bodies placed?

A. As a general rule, the ideal burial depth for optimal decomposition conditions is 3.5 to 4 feet from the bottom of the grave to the soil horizon, which also guarantees an 18-24-inch barrier from the surface. By adding the displaced soil to the top of the grave in a mound, that depth is doubled until it gradually settles.

Q. Do un-embalmed bodies pollute the ground with chemo or other drugs?

A. Soil is the best natural filter there is, binding organic compounds and making them unable to travel. Microorganisms in the soil break down any chemical compounds that remain in the body.

Q. How long does it take for a body to completely decompose?

A. Depending on soil type, oxygen availability, and moisture present, it takes an average of six weeks to lose the majority of soft tissue through moisture absorption by the soil, and up to two years for complete decomposition. It may take up to 20 years for bones to absorb in moist soils. (See the Suggested Resources area on the back page of this handout.)

Q. What soil conditions are the most favorable for green burial?

A. Well drained soils with some clay content to absorb organic compounds, and an active biological presence of bacteria are ideal for promoting efficient decomposition. This allows for aerobic decay, followed by anaerobic decay, resulting in rich soils high in nitrogen content and organic compounds.

Q. Will wild animals dig up bodies?

A. No. There's no evidence of animals digging up bodies in natural burial grounds when standard practices are followed, which include burying the body 3.5 feet deep.

Q. Will visitors be able to smell bodies?

A. No. Standard natural burial practices at 3.5 feet deep create at least an 18-inch odor barrier that prevents scent from escaping.

Q. How soon can someone purchase a burial site?

A. Once we have purchased a site, and secured the appropriate permits, we anticipate beginning operations within 18 months.

Q. How close together will graves be dug?

A. Burial density depends primarily on the type of cemetery and its space availability, and on the amount of usable burial land on a property. Wetlands, steep slopes, trails, habitat, pristine areas, protected and sensitive flora areas, trees, boulders, and other factors mapped out during planning will affect the total acreage practical for burial.

Approximately 300 burials per open and unimpeded acre over a hundred-year period would be the maximum allowed; but it would likely be much less given the above considerations.

Q. How much are conservation burial plots expected to cost?

A. Initial estimates are approximately \$4,000 per plot, with a sliding scale offered for those with limited resources.



Q. How will conservation burial help with restoration and conservation of the selected site?

A. Conservation burial allows a body's nutrients to mend the soil and feed the plants that are being used to restore the site. The fees paid for a burial go toward the purchase of restoration materials and stewardship of the site in a manner that's consistent with the conservation easement held on a property.

As burials take place, native plants placed at each location not only serve as a memorial but will slowly restore the site to a native northwest environment.

Any fees collected in excess of what is needed for the burial ground's maintenance and restoration may go toward supporting other Jefferson Land Trust conservation projects.

Q. Would I have to use a specific funeral home to use Olympic Wildland Burial Grounds' conservation burial options?

A. We expect to have an arrangement with a preferred local funeral home, but we will be happy to work with any funeral home that agrees to follow our burial policies.

Although funeral homes provide valuable services, such as completing paperwork, providing refrigeration, and transporting remains, "home funerals" will also be allowed in accordance with applicable laws. A home funeral allows the family to retain possession of their loved one's body after death, as long as mandatory state paperwork is completed, and proper protocols are followed.

Q. How can bodies be properly prepared for burial and what is a home funeral?

A. Home funerals, which allow families to care for a decedent and all aspects of a funeral at home, were quite common in the U.S. up until the 1930s. For home funerals, family and friends, next of kin, or a legally designated agent retain custody and control of the body for the time period between death and disposition (burial or cremation). This is sometimes referred to as home vigil or DIY funeral.

A home funeral involves bathing and dressing the body, and using dry ice, Techni-ice, or another cooling mechanism as a preservative. A home funeral guide from the Home Funeral Alliance may provide education and support either prior to or during this time period. (See the Suggested Resources section below for information.)

Q. What are blended funerals?

A. Funerals that combine conventional funeral practices with home funeral and/or green burial practices may include the use of a funeral director for certain aspects of care, such as obtaining, completing, and filing paperwork or transporting the body. Blended funerals offer families more options, especially when certain options are not available in their area.

Q. Can families be involved in taking care of burial sites to restore the land?

A. Yes, we expect that families will be welcome to help with opening and closing the burial site, planting pre-approved native plants at the site, and even volunteering with staff members to care for the property into the future.

Suggested Resources:

- *The Science Behind Green Burial* on the Green Burial Council website has some helpful information. Find it online at www.greenburialcouncil.org/science_green_burial.html.
- The National Home Funeral Alliance's *NFA Home Funeral Guide* can be downloaded at www.homefuneralalliance.org/home-funeral-guidebook.html.

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