

If you care for the environment, should you choose cremation?

It's a subject that rarely crops up, but when a death happens even the most environmentally conscious are unlikely to be aware of the options and there's little time to do research. So here's a quick round-up of what needs to be considered when choosing between cremation, traditional burial or natural burial.

KEY ISSUES	CREMATION - IS BAD FOR THE PLANET	TRADITIONAL BURIAL - IS NOT GOOD	NATURAL BURIAL - IS SUSTAINABLE
Energy consumption	 High - each incineration/cremation uses 285 kWh of gas + 15 kWh of electricity	Moderate – Embodied energy in manufactured caskets and reinforced concrete grave vaults. (Sealed vaults and caskets inhibit natural decomposition)	 Shallower, more aerobic decomposition – zero
Contribution to global warming	 High – crematoria are not run at peak efficiency; the waste heat is not captured and reused; the aggregate CO2 emissions are considerable.	Moderate – due to intensive land management, imported memorials and the waste that goes to landfill. High CO2 emissions from concrete infrastructure.	 Zero – possibly less than zero if trees are planted.
Pollution	 16% of UK's Mercury pollution comes from cremation. Cremations constitute a significant source of dioxins and furans - persistent organic pollutants.	 Formaldehyde based embalming chemicals have the potential to pollute groundwater. Buried plastics and metals do not biodegrade. MDF & Chipboard coffins introduce further formaldehyde.	 Only natural, biodegradable materials enter the ground. No embalmed remains are buried. Mercury in fillings remains intact and inert.
Land usage	 Crematoria gardens of remembrance are extensive, high maintenance, wildlife deserts, which generate huge amounts of waste.	 There is simply not enough space on the planet for traditional cemeteries to accommodate us all with a headstone.	 Dual land use means that the land is used for burials whilst continuing to be productive pasture, hay meadow, woodland, or wildlife habitat.
Flowers	 Encourages the purchase of environmentally damaging imported or hot-house cut flowers, plastic trays, oasis, wire and cellophane , which are thrown away by the skip-load each week.	 Encourages the purchase of environmentally damaging, imported or hot-house cut flowers, plastic trays, oasis, wire and cellophane , which cemeteries send to landfill by the skip-load each week.	 Locally grown flowers only; no plastic trays, oasis, wire or cellophane are permitted. Native seasonal bulbs and wildflower seeds are encouraged. Tree planting is sometimes an option.
Memorials	 Imported headstones travel across the globe from gigantic environmentally catastrophic quarries.	 Imported headstones travel across the globe from gigantic environmentally catastrophic quarries.	 Memorials are typically wooden or local stone, from sustainable sources and have minimal impact on the landscape.
Other environmental impacts	 Ashes scattered on iconic mountain tops change the soil characteristics and the native flora dies	 Cemetery maintenance is highly energy intensive and mechanised, uses toxic weed-killers and creates wildlife deserts. Vases are insect death traps.	 Creates new habitats for wildlife, encourages biodiversity, preserves landscapes, has minimal environmental impact as a goal.
Sustainability	 NO	 NO	 YES - especially where the land is pasture.
Myths	"Saves the land for the living" – NO, cremation's contribution to global warming and use of finite resources is damaging the earth for future generations. Crematoria gardens are extensive and unnatural; scattered ashes damage local habitats.	"Families regularly visit the grave". In reality, after 10 years, most do not but the gravestone continues to take up space and remains a maintenance burden.	"Methane from burials causes global warming" – NO, any methane naturally biodegrades in the soil before reaching the surface.