

The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide

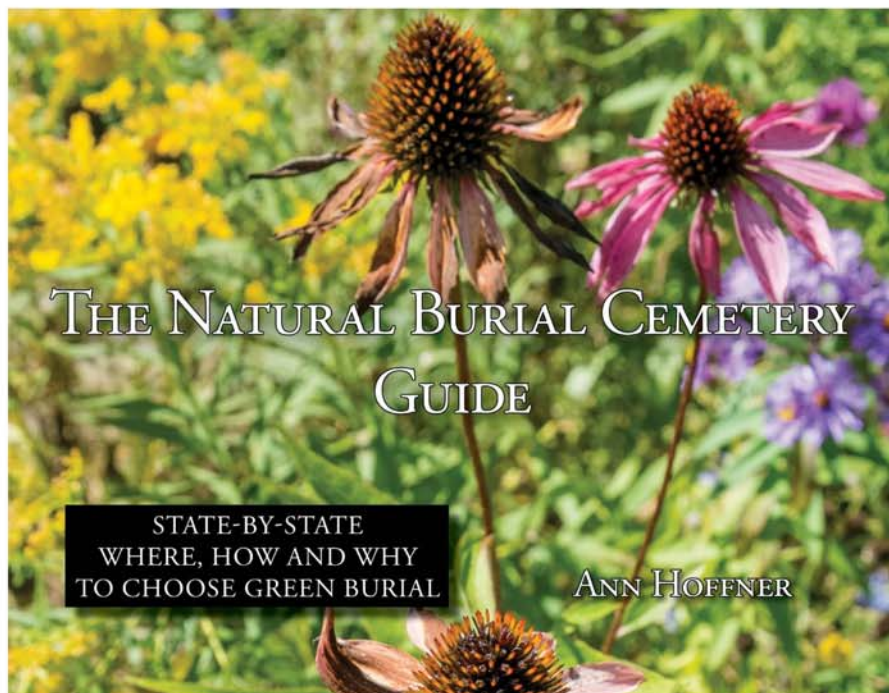
State-by-State Where, How and Why to Choose Green Burial

Review by Mary Reilly-McNellan

I love exploring cemeteries and have a plethora of books on my library shelf to prove it. I don't, however, have one that specifically targets natural burial cemeteries, so I was delighted to learn about Ann Hoffner's new publication, *The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide: State-By-State Where, How and Why to Choose Green Burial*. This handsome, comprehensive guide provides information on everything you ever wanted to

know—and then some—about existing green burial grounds in the US. It is clear that the author spent many, many hours meticulously researching her subject, and the result is a beautiful, full-color, PDF publication that provides information on over 125 cemeteries. The book begins with a vivid description of Hoffner's own experience burying her father at Steelmantown Cemetery, a natural burial ground in southern New Jersey. She recalls how the woods were full of life that day—the sounds of nature, a monarch butterfly flitting by—as her father's unembalmed, shrouded body was lowered into a hand-dug grave. Participating in the burial proved to be a truly soul-expanding experience for the author. "He joined an ecosystem," she writes, "and because he could no longer move, life came to him."

Vibrant wildflowers grace the cover, and images of cemeteries and green burial gravesites throughout the book illustrate the beauty of the woodlands, meadows, and trails found in many natural burial



settings. Hoffner has compiled a wide array of data from online sources, personal communications, interviews, and site visits. Colorful maps assist the reader in targeting regional areas or locating the nearest natural burial grounds. Introductory information about the subject of "green" or "natural" burial is included, as well as an explanation of the natural burial ratings—"hybrid," "natural," or "conservation"—developed by the Green Burial Council (GBC). Because the practice has not yet been completely embraced by the funeral industry, the author has included a helpful section on mortuaries that work with green burial for each region.

The meat of the book, however, is contained in the cemetery entries themselves—color-coded by region and organized by state. An easy-to-read table format has synthesized a great deal of information to help readers better understand what is offered at each natural burial site. All of the basic information is included—location, contact information, website, ownership,

start-up date, GBC certification level (if any), plot purchase and interment costs, natural setting, types of burial containers permitted/available, regulations regarding embalming, grave markers, and burial vaults, whether families can help with grave digging, care and maintenance policies, decoration and memorialization rules, and even pet burial policies.

A notable section of each table is the burial ground's story, and the author has included

all sorts of interesting little tidbits to ponder. For instance, I was amused to learn that, "You don't have to be rich or famous to be buried at Congressional Cemetery. You just have to be dead." And who knew that this final resting place for many notable senators and House members now serves as one of Washington DC's largest off-leash dog parks? Or that some natural burial grounds employ such cutting edge, "walk to site" GPS technologies to locate graves via smartphone? All sorts of compelling informational nuggets can be gleaned from this section.

The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide is also useful to groups or individuals interested in establishing a natural burial ground—it offers the opportunity to learn about potential issues, concerns, and best conservation practices. It was heartening to read, for instance, that some natural burial grounds are embracing such ecological tools as selective weeding of invasive exotic plants, seeding and planting of native stock, controlled burns, and

adding organic matter to soil for land restoration.

As an environmental journalist, Hoffner demonstrates her commitment to greening the environment by making the publication available in PDF file form only. Readers have the option to purchase and download the 303-page book in its entirety or select a PDF file of one of four specific regions (Northeast, South, Midwest, or West)—a great idea for those interested in a limited area of the United States. I don't know about you, but my bookshelves are way too crowded, and I appreciate having the opportunity to save some trees.

Because natural burial is becoming increasingly popular, I was concerned that the book's specific burial ground information/pricing may become quickly outdated. Hoffner addresses this by reminding readers to check in with individual cemeteries for any changes that may have been made since publication. And as they come online, additional natural burial grounds will be added to a future edition. A listing of Canada's green cemeteries will be available later this year.

Whether you are simply interested in learning more about natural burial or have a specific green cemetery that you would like to research, Hoffner's book will provide the answers. She has literally left no stone unturned.

For pricing information or to order a PDF of *The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide*, visit greenburialnaturally.org 