

# Handbook



Vermont Forest  
Cemetery

2023

# Welcome to Vermont Forest Cemetery.

This is the Green Mountain State's first forest cemetery, its first conservation cemetery, and its first cemetery dedicated to natural burial. VFC's mission has five branches: **Burial, Conservation, Art, Learning** and **Community**. This forest can sustain you in life, so that you can make the choice to sustain it with your body after death.

VFC has partnered with the [White River Natural Resources Conservation District](#). This gives the Cemetery an extra layer of conservation protection and a foundation for exploring best practices for natural burial and forest stewardship. The first 'sister cemetery' is [the Spirit Sanctuary](#) in Essex, New York. Together we are working to reconnect and protect the Champlain Wildlife Corridor.

We are a registered 501(c)13 non-profit. Your donations are 100% tax-deductible. We have two designated funds: one for general cemetery operations and one to support people with the cost of natural burial.

## How does it work?

All are welcome at Vermont Forest Cemetery. A fundamental difference between this and many conventional cemeteries is that family and loved ones are not only welcomed to participate, but encouraged to do so rather than merely observing.

Vermont Forest Cemetery staff will prepare the grave. Family and/or loved ones are encouraged to participate in the opening of the grave and are responsible for pall-bearing, lowering, and beginning to fill in the grave. We can complete closing the grave if you do not.

VFC will work with you for this to be as comfortable as possible. If there is something you cannot do, please let us know when you arrange the burial and we can assist. If you want to include natural burial in your end of life planning we recommend you contact our sister business, [Green Mountain Funeral Alternatives](#).

**Families have the right to be their own funeral director.** If necessary, Vermont Forest Cemetery can arrange assistance with, but is not responsible for:

- preparation of and filing of required documentation
- arranging body care
- funeral service
- sheltering of the body prior to burial
- transportation of the body to the Cemetery

VFC can provide graveside services for a small fee. We can also offer burial coordination. If you have not made plans for natural burial at the Cemetery in advance, we can arrange a 2-hour orientation at the time of death with tips on how to be ready for the burial.

## What *is* natural burial?

At Vermont Forest Cemetery, we dig no more than four feet (about 120 cm) deep so that the body and its bacteria can remain in contact with the active layers of the soil, where oxygen, moisture, warmth, and soil bacteria aid in recycling the body's elements. The miraculous mycorrhizal network, made up of fungi in a mutually-supportive relationship with the roots of growing things, absorbs, filters, and transports these elements as nutrients for the forest. In natural burial, the body is not just figuratively, but also literally returned to the Earth.

The body is bathed, often by loved ones, and kept cool until the time of interment, but there's no embalming or other preservation. The body is placed in a biodegradable container made of natural materials—like a pine coffin, a willow basket, or a linen shroud—and lowered gently to rest on pine boughs, leaves, and other green matter. It's in this way that burial helps sequester carbon rather than adding more to the atmosphere.

## Deed to Convey Burial Rights

Reserving a space for burial at Vermont Forest Cemetery works quite differently than at most cemeteries. We strongly encourage—and welcome—people to make several visits to really get to know all the different areas of the Cemetery before choosing a location. Because the forest may (and likely will) change between the time of Burial Deed purchase and when it is needed, selection of the specific burial site will happen at the time of interment, in consultation with the next of kin.

Unlike conventional cemeteries, we will generally not remove trees or other natural features to accommodate a site (though we may have to temporarily displace a small amount of vegetation as we dig the grave), so your choices will be affected by the natural landscape. For this reason we encourage Burial Deed holders to come to Vermont Forest Cemetery and choose their plot for themselves if possible when death is likely to occur in 6 months. Staff will meet you there to help you consider your options.

If more than one person is purchasing a Burial Deed at the same time, you are welcome to reserve adjacent sites at that time if you wish to be buried in close proximity to your loved ones.

Those interested in reserving space at Vermont Forest Cemetery can schedule a tour at [cemetery.eco/tours](https://cemetery.eco/tours)

At Vermont Forest Cemetery we know that your gravesite is important to you. Because the forest changes every year, the site that you love may look very different. It may be helpful to think of the site as the backdrop for your burial service, rather than your “forever spot”. The people you love will be able to visit your specific grave and marker. The process of natural burial means that your body will become part of the forest. You can reserve the right to be buried in advance and note any preference for area: for example the Spruce vs. the Hardwood Grove and wilder as opposed to more accessible.

## The Process

In our current way of dying in America, professionals do everything behind closed doors with loved ones mostly or entirely left out. While we can and do work with mainstream funeral homes, at Vermont Forest Cemetery our mission and ethos is to help loved ones have the experience that is most supportive of their grieving.

The outline below is general, but describes what is involved in the natural deathcare process leading up to a burial at Vermont Forest Cemetery. (The terms “family” and “loved ones” are used interchangeably to describe those who will carry out the deceased’s wishes after death, at the discretion of the legal next of kin or agent of disposition.)

1. If the death was expected, the family and loved ones need do nothing at first but to take some time to breathe and be with the enormity of this moment. This is the right of everyone who has suffered a loss.
2. Have the death certified. This happens automatically in a hospital; if death occurs at home, call the hospice provider (if the person was on hospice) or local police non-emergency line (if not).
3. Notify Vermont Forest Cemetery. We need at least 48 hours notice in the summer and prefer 72 hours notice in the winter.
4. Complete the Preliminary Record of Death (if working with a funeral director skip this step). If the family does not already have a contract with a funeral home, Vermont Forest Cemetery has a sister business, Green Mountain Funeral Alternatives, which can assist.

5. Obtain a Burial Transit Permit and Death Certificate from the Town Clerk. A funeral director can do this; if the family does not already have a contract with a funeral home, Green Mountain Funeral Alternatives, can assist.
6. The body may be kept at home or may be transported to a funeral home. It should not be embalmed, just bathed and kept cool: as close to 45° as is practical.
7. If a burial plot has not already been selected, loved ones come to the cemetery to pick a specific location.
8. If there is not already a burial container, the family will obtain a casket, coffin, or shroud of natural, biodegradable material.
9. The body is dressed, and if desired, shrouded and/or placed in a casket. Hair and makeup can be done as they normally would be.
10. The family will arrange for transportation of the body. Vermont Forest Cemetery does not offer transportation services, which can be coordinated by a funeral director. If loved ones are not working with a funeral director, GMFA can assist.
11. The body is transported by vehicle to the Cemetery, and carried by hand to the gravesite. We suggest 4 to 6 pallbearers. VFC can assist, with advance notice.
12. If desired, there is a graveside service. VFC can help arrange for an interfaith minister to preside, with advance notice.
13. Loved ones lower the body into the grave. VFC can assist, with advance notice.
14. Loved ones fill in the grave. VFC can assist, with advance notice.

## Policies Regarding Interment of Remains

### Remains After Embalming:

Returning the body to the earth in natural burial is a partnership between the body and the soil, and our gut biome plays a key role in this process. Because embalming—even with natural chemicals—destroys the gut biome, we discourage the interment of embalmed remains at Vermont Forest Cemetery. If embalming is necessary for reconstruction purposes or other unavoidable circumstances, please contact us.

### Remains After Cremation:

Ashes after cremation have a pH of about 11.4 and are devoid of any nutrients accessible to the soil. Ashes can be buried at a depth of 5 feet, amended and turned into the soil with a special compost mixture, or scattered in symbolic amounts in designated scattering areas.

Remains After Natural Organic Reduction (also known as “human composting”):  
Depending on the volume of remains, can be interred in a half or or full lot

Remains After Alkaline Hydrolysis (also known as “aquamation”):  
We are actively studying the impact of remains after alkaline hydrolysis.

Pacemakers & Artificial Joints:

We ask that all external devices (including ports) be removed, and pacemakers as well, when possible. Artificial joints, heart valves, and other internal medical devices do not need to be removed.

After autopsy and/or organ/tissue donation:

There are no prohibitions against natural burial following an autopsy, organ, and/or tissue donation. However, we do ask that the body be prepared without plastics, which are standard.

Bodies donated to science are returned to the family after cremation and can be interred under our cremated remains policy.

All burial is considered final disposition. There is no disinterment without a court order.

## Burial and Graveside Services

Vermont Forest Cemetery will prepare the gravesite for burial. Loved ones are welcome to participate in the preparation with advance notice. The family is responsible for arranging for pallbearers, people to lower the body into the grave, and people to fill (at least begin to fill) the grave.

Graves will be dug to fit the size of the container; on average they will be 225 cm (just over 7 feet) in length, 125 cm (about 4 feet) wide, and 125 cm deep. There will be boards laid along the long edges to stand on, and boards across the grave upon which the container or backboard will be rested. There are also straps laid across the grave to lower the body down when the time comes. You should expect to walk through the woods. People serving as pallbearers will carry the body and place it above the grave.

Any sort of graveside ceremony or service is welcome. We can provide some assistance with planning, as well as with chairs and umbrellas. The grave can be decorated with any materials during the burial service, but anything not made of natural, biodegradable materials not on the surface of the grave should be removed by the family after the

ceremony. Any such materials remaining by the grave will be removed by cemetery staff and returned to the family.

This is a rustic cemetery in a rural location. Sensible footwear, such as sneakers or hiking shoes, is a must. Hats and sunscreen are good for sunny days. Wear bug spray in season. If you will be assisting with opening and/or closing the grave be sure to dress appropriately for labor and bring work gloves. We are completely outdoors and at 1,200 feet elevation so it can get quite cold. We recommend that you dress with respect for the season, the surroundings, and the ceremony.

## Markers and Decoration of Graves

Any time after the closing of the grave, friends and family may choose to decorate the burial site with natural items (moss, wood, plants, natural stone) from the immediate area. If a marker is desired it must be of wood or a naturally occurring local stone, and some areas designated for rewilding will have size restrictions. Letters and numbers may be carved on the stone but the stone itself should retain its natural shape.

VFC staff will not maintain gravesites: the intention is for nature to reclaim the burial areas. Friends and family may, if they wish, weed and water to encourage specific native plants and to discourage non-native plants. No pesticides of any kind are to be used on the site. Native animals are welcome to use this habitat and we will not remove, trap, or kill native animals that also call Vermont Forest Cemetery ‘home.’

We encourage letting nature select which plants will cover the gravesite, or transplanting small native plants from the immediate area surrounding the grave. Any plants brought from outside should be native to the Central Vermont highlands (not just a “native” plant sold in Central Vermont). If using a purchased plant, we ask that you rinse the soil from the roots and carry it to Vermont Forest Cemetery “bare root.” This will help prevent unwanted organisms from entering the conservation area. Recommendations on a local nursery you can work with can be found on our website.

Friends and family members are welcome to visit Vermont Forest Cemetery at any time. Companion animals are welcome, but must remain on leash and any waste must be immediately removed. Hikers are welcome if they stay on the main trails and maintain a respectful attitude. Motorized vehicles are only permissible by prior arrangement if they are required for mobility.



## Operations During Winter and Mud Season

Vermont Forest Cemetery is open for burial year-round. Generally, in winter, we can shovel a path to the gravesite and around the grave. If necessary, our gravediggers will thaw the ground to open the grave and pile the soil from the grave on top of the snow to facilitate closing the grave. We will not remove snow from the grave once it is closed.

Be aware that Vermont Forest Cemetery is located on a Class III gravel town highway and that it may not be possible to reach the site during winter storms or in the period of thaw known as “mud season.” If death should occur at such a time, the family will need to arrange sheltering of the body until burial is possible. Vermont Forest Cemetery can help connect families with a suitable funeral establishment, but does not have a mortuary cooler and cannot shelter a body before burial.

## Companion Animals

Companion animals may be buried at Vermont Forest Cemetery. Owners will be encouraged to open and close the graves themselves with the support of Vermont Forest Cemetery staff. Markers may be placed in accordance with the guidelines in “Decorating the Grave” above.

## Transportation of Remains to the Cemetery

A licensed funeral establishment (such as Green Mountain Funeral Alternatives) can arrange for transportation of the body to the Cemetery. If families have a suitable vehicle, it is legally permissible to transport the body themselves.

One does not need to be a resident of Vermont to be buried at Vermont Forest Cemetery. However, we do encourage recognition of the fact that transport by air, or even extended travel using motor vehicles, does generate a substantial carbon impact that is not offset by natural burial.