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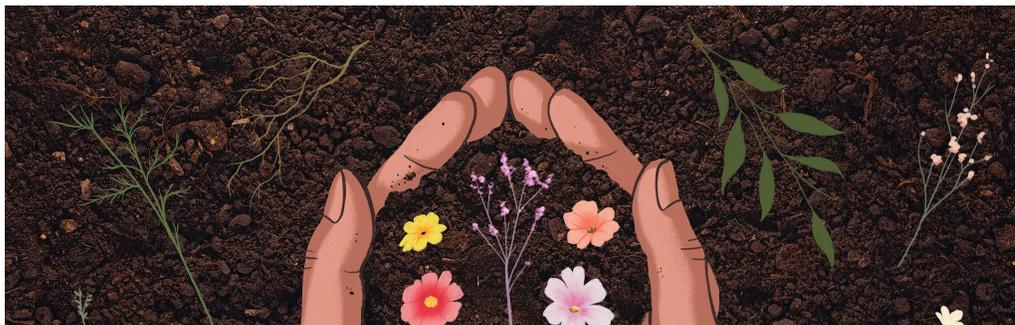
Human Composting: A New Take on the 'Green' Funeral

This growing trend uses an organic process to transform the body into nutrient-rich soil

By Robin L. Flanigan, AARP

[3 Comments](#)

Published December 06, 2024





ROB DOBI



It's common to compost food scraps, yard waste, and other organic materials. But what about humans?

While radical and unconventional to some, human composting is the latest alternative in [green funerals](#) – environmentally friendly options that limit the use of chemicals and pollution for burial.

The process, known as terramation, soil transformation and natural organic reduction, transforms a body into nutrient-rich soil suitable for fertilization – without the use of chemicals – generally takes between one to three months.



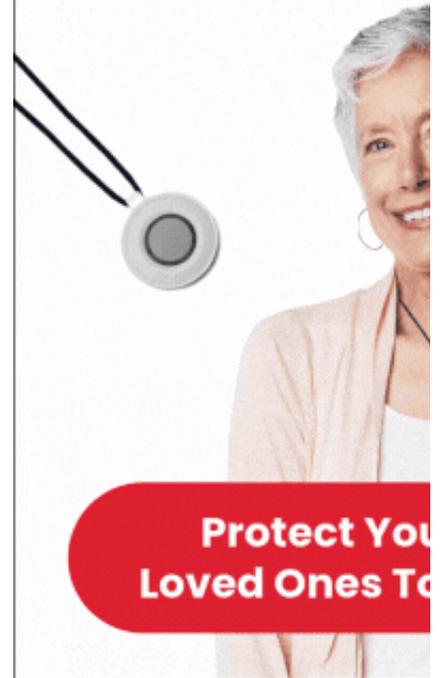
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“While it’s getting labeled as a new process, what we’re doing is actually as old as time,” says Tom Harries, CEO of Earth Funeral, which offers human composting services at facilities in Auburn, Washington, and Las Vegas, Nevada. “What we’re doing is accelerating what happens to an organism naturally after it dies [by using] science and technology.”

Interest in green burials has been gaining ground for years. Sixty-eight percent of respondents surveyed in the 2024 National Funeral Directors Association’s Consumer Awareness and Preferences Report would like to explore nontoxic end-of-life alternatives, compared with nearly 56 percent in 2021.

Human composting is now legal in 12 states. Washington was the first to legalize the option in 2019. In April 2024, Arizona became the eighth state to do so when Gov. Katie Hobbs signed House Bill 2081, also known as the “Grandpa in the Garden Bill.”

Earth Funeral operates in Arizona, California, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah and Washington, and aims to open at least five more facilities over the next three years.

Here’s what to know about this end-of-life substitute for [traditional burials](#) and cremation.

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Learn about the process

At Earth Funeral, bodies are placed inside a custom-built vessel, which optimizes temperature, moisture, and oxygen levels to create perfect conditions for microbes to break down the body at a molecular level, according to Harries.

This takes 45 days.



COURTESY EARTH FUNERAL

Since launching in 2022, Earth Funeral has worked with more than 2,500 families.

The nutrient-rich soil that results weighs 300 pounds, on average. Because this is “obviously

too much for most people” to scatter or plant, says Harries, families can donate any remaining soil to one of the company’s conservation projects.

One of the projects is focused on restoring existing forest and emergent wetland ecosystems in a historically over logged, five-acre property on the Olympic Peninsula. The other is helping to improve the habitat and soil at the base of the Sierra Foothills, including converting land formerly used for agriculture to a native oak savannah ecosystem.

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“It’s one really nice way to give back to the planet, but it’s practical as well,” says Harries, who plans to be composted when he dies. Comparing the process to cremation, he adds: “The idea of being gently transformed into soil and returned to nature seemed way more

appealing than being cremated at 1,500 degrees.”

Recompose, a human composting company based in Seattle, Washington, partners with nonprofit organizations to protect and regenerate ecosystems through conservation, rewilding, and other restoration practices.



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Consider concerns

Not all states have jumped on board the human-composting bandwagon. Even those who have are navigating new territory as they develop suitable standards and regulations to ensure safe and environmentally sound practices.

On the regulation front, Harries says facilities such as Earth Funeral are licensed and regulated by state agencies. Earth Funeral also undergoes an annual inspection.



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There are religious concerns for some. The Catholic Church opposes the option; in a March 23, 2023, statement, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine said that after evaluating human composting, it concluded that the process failed “to satisfy the Church's requirements for proper respect for the bodies of the dead.”

And there’s a lack of research on the process — though proponents such as Return Home, a human composting facility based in Seattle, Washington, argue that the more legalization there is, the more information researchers will have to conduct extensive studies.

“The more data we have, the better,” says Return Home CEO Micah Truman. “That said, we had to complete a full lab analysis of our soil for the first 80 cases. All passed, and we have detailed reporting for all of it.”

Founded in January 2019 and open to the public since June 2021, Return Home worked with approximately 60 families in its first full year of operation, and projects working with between 350 and 400 families in 2025.

Understand costs

Human composting can be more affordable than a traditional burial or cremation.

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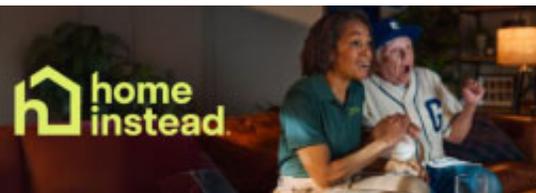
The National Funeral Directors Association puts the national median [cost of a funeral](#) with a viewing and burial at \$8,300, and the median cost of a funeral with cremation at \$6,280.

Earth Funeral and Return Home charge around \$5,000, not counting travel expenses should a body need to be moved from another state where the process is not yet legal. (Bodies are packed in dry ice and transported via plane.)

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Have conversations about your end-of-life wishes

While you may have decided human composting is the right choice for you, it's imperative to make sure loved ones are [aware of your final wishes](#), says Camelia L. Clarke, spokesperson for the National Funeral Directors Association and a licensed funeral director based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

"This will help them to have a healthy grief journey," Clarke says. "If you haven't prepared them, they may have the burden of [not being able to honor] mom or dad's wishes because of a

regulatory issue.”

Tim Andruss agrees. The 64-year-old became an Earth Funeral customer after his wife, Alenka, passed away in October 2023. They’d been together 38 years.

“It is a new-enough option that it could leave some people flummoxed, and it’s not something that one would want to be explaining under the duress of the loss,” says Andruss, who lives in Olympia, Washington. “Personally, I’ve found that the people who gain an understanding of organic reduction versus more traditional Western methods of caring for the passed have come to embrace the concept, and have often begun similar planning themselves.”



Alenka Andruss on her birthday with her new "gardening wagon."

COURTESY TIM ANDRUSS

Embrace the sentimentality



the gentle
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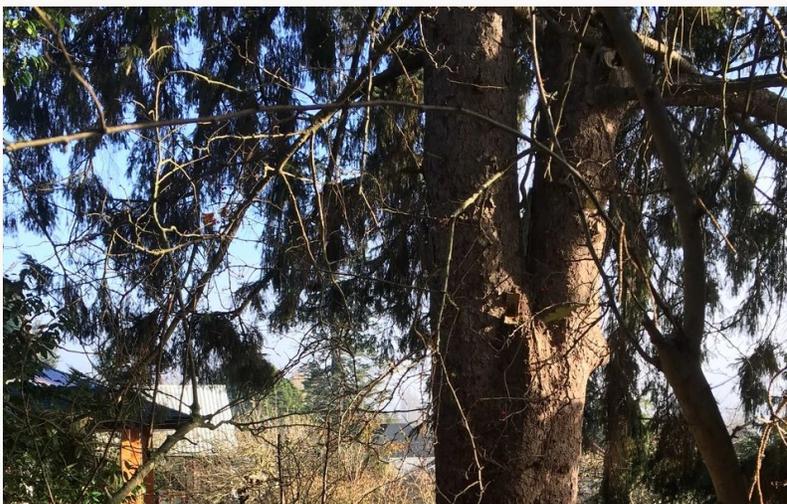
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*Source: 273 Dermatologists at A&D, USA.

Andruss and his wife were avid gardeners, so Andruss is using his wife's soil to create a backyard perennial garden in her memory to be filled with purple flowers – her favorite color. He has given away some soil to his wife's daughter, spread some in overseas locales that were meaningful to the couple, and donated the rest to conservation projects.

“Alenka's soil is so alive,” says Andruss, who plans to be composted when he dies. Comparing the process to cremation, he continues, “Ash just feels like ‘Here are some remains,’ and the soil feels like there's life to it, because there is.”

Return Home customer Roberta Vollendorff, 73, buried all 240 pounds of soil from her son Sean's terramation beneath the gigantic sitka spruce tree on her farm, where she raised her family. Sean, a highly decorated Special Weapons and Tactics officer for the Takoma Police Department, died by suicide.





The tree where Roberta Vollendorff spread composted soil from her son Sean's terramation.

COURTESY ROBERTA VOLLENDORFF

It was “our laughing tree, our crying tree, our hiding tree, our everything tree,” says Vollendorff, a retired special education teacher from Bellingham, Washington. “To me, the magic was having my son under the tree he grew up with.... I wasn’t losing him. I was having him be with me.”

Even the transformation process can offer some sense of connection.

Truman recalls seeing a woman during Return Home’s public visiting hours with her back up against a vessel, her eyes closed. The woman later said she could feel the heat of her mother against her back.

“There are intensely beautiful things about this,” Truman says.

Robin L. Flanigan is a contributing writer who covers mental health, education and human interest stories for several national publications. She is a former reporter for several daily newspapers, and her work has appeared in People, USA Today and Education Week. She is the author of the children's book *M Is for Mindful*.

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NancyD994470 DECEMBER 7, 2024

Green burials sound like the best environmentally-friendly option and what happens anyone when we die so no religion should object to it, it's natural.

[REPLY](#) | 2 Replies | 8

jeannettea105085 MARCH 24, 2025

Reply to **NancyD994470**

I wonder if people have considered putting the green remains in a grave the reason I ask if ones husband has been buried traditionally could the wife have a green body disintegration and be put in the grave by the husband?

[REPLY](#) | 1 Reply | 1

katscott APRIL 6, 2025

Reply to **jeannettea105085**

Good question! I think that's a question that could best be answered by the cemetery where the plots are. Ask the Earth representatives how one goes about making thae arrangements.

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