



Cremation Gardens

more choices for your cemetery

Cemeteries face the growth of cremation in a variety of ways. Very few deny cremation's impact, but how they react ranges from resignation to opportunism. The transition to opportunism is often forced by high cremation rate regions and the decision to look ahead and not back.

Our work with cemetery planning presents to us a wide range of situations, from small rural, community-oriented properties to high-density metropolitan sites. To some extent, the locations and

sizes of the cemeteries shape their outlook, but ultimately the management's outlook is the most critical component.

Cemetery trustees and managers with the least cemetery experience

and outside business backgrounds often are the most open-minded when it comes to meeting the public's growing preference for cremation over traditional interment. This

probably shouldn't come as a surprise. A person who has been in cemetery operations over the past 30 or 40 years often sees cremation as a choice of economy over tradition. Cremation interment and services were priced accordingly – as a low-end product. When cremation rates were low, the impact of this approach was not necessarily felt. When the cremation rates grow steadily to one-third, one-half or in some places two-thirds of a cemetery's activity, the results are potentially devastating. Coupled with bland, utility-only "urn sections," the low return approach perpetuates itself.

It's naïve to deny that some of the public's decisions for cremation are based on the lower cost, but the vast majority of the savings in cremation are on the funeral end of the process. After the funeral, a welcoming, beautifully landscaped setting for inurnment and remembrance is important to most people, and there is a relatively small cost to pay for





those essentials.

The open promotion and development of a high-quality cremation garden is a leap of faith. There is no guarantee of success, but there is a guarantee of failure if nothing is ventured. The average person on the street in most areas has probably never heard of a columbarium. If they hear the term “cremation garden,” they are likely to associate it with scattering and no memorialization. This is the challenge for cemeteries. A small-scale introduction of a cremation garden with plans and illustrations for growth are the seed for future success. Some investment is involved, but without it, there is no transition. The average-sized garden that we work with is about 4,000 to 5,000 square feet, or about one-tenth of an acre.

In a recent, brief visit to an old central Connecticut community cemetery, a very dedicated and caring trustee explained to us how their cemetery was “dying on the vine”

financially. The cemetery was small, attractive and well-maintained but had only a small, undeveloped corner left. They only had a handful of recent lot sales, and of their services, cremation dominated over full burial. They had two offerings for cremation: extremely low-cost burial on full-sized graves or burial in their urn section. The urn section was a small grid near the entrance with one simple memorial option, no landscaping or any other attraction. The area was obscure, and it was clear why it was never well received. Urn burials on full-sized lots were more popular, but the income to the cemetery was a fraction of that of a

full burial. The future maintenance costs for the lot are the same as for full-sized burials, and this, plus the unnecessary waste of their dwindling land, all contribute to a dismal long-term financial outlook.

Through the challenging economy and changing traditions, it’s easy to understand the instinct for cemeteries to curtail the cost of new sections or options. Cremation choices, however, continue to grow. A well-designed modest response in the form of a cremation garden with potential for growth is the best answer. These responses are the difference between cemeteries that are beginning to see the fruits of that venture from those that are hanging on in desperation.

We have witnessed several cremation success stories in the past few years, and they are not necessarily the large

Above: By master planning a larger area and developing in smaller phases, garden development costs are minimized and the final build-out is coordinated (River Bend Cemetery – Westerly, R.I.). **Left:** Cremation areas adapt easily to architectural locations (Venice Memorial Gardens – Venice, Fla.). (Photos courtesy of David Ward)




Above: Previously unused but prominent sites, such as roadway turn-arounds, can be ideal settings for cremation options (Greenwood Union Cemetery – Rye, N.Y.). **Right:** Elevated, highly visible locations are needed for cremation garden “self-promotion” (Wintergreen Gorge Cemetery – Erie, Pa.). (Photos courtesy of David Ward)

“heavy hitter” properties with high profiles and large financial reserves. Their common thread is commitment to a high-visibility site, a high-quality, inviting landscaped environment, a variety of options and reality-based pricing. Promotion and public education are also critical components but only if the facility exists and can be seen by the potential buyers.

As we’ve analyzed the actual results of these “higher-achieving” cremation gardens, the benefits to the cemeteries are consistent:

- Square footage space and service dollars that are 3 to 4 times that of traditional interment
- Maintenance and service costs that are a fraction of traditional sections
- Land consumption rates 5 to 6 times less than in the past
- Smaller expansions that are less expensive to create and easily adapted to change in the future

The most subtle and probably




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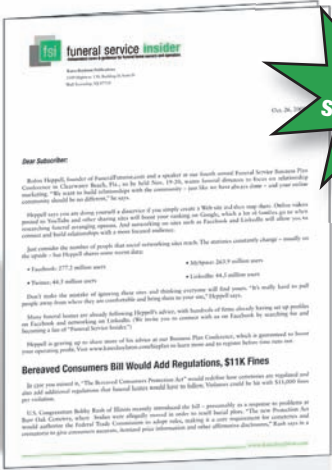






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most important result of a well-designed and -constructed cremation garden is in public perception. With each garden sale, each funeral that filters through or each casual walker that sees these developments, a stronger association between cremation and the role of the cemetery is formed. Landscaped, peaceful settings and permanent memorialization do not have to be a part of the choice for cremation, and there are many social factors working against it. Not the least of these negative factors is cemetery-based denial and inaction. Many cemeteries are now realizing this and meeting the challenge.

As new generations break from traditions, the human appreciation for beauty and remembrance will likely remain, but it will evolve. All cemeteries will need to be a part of that evolution to survive and flourish. •





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