

Spirit Sanctuary Frequently Asked Questions

If someone wants to be buried at Spirit Sanctuary what do they need to do?

The best way is to plan ahead. (If you are here because someone is close to death, or has just died, please see below **“Can someone who has not planned ahead still be buried at Spirit Sanctuary?”**) Burial at Spirit Sanctuary means that you will not be embalmed, that you are in a biodegradable container or shroud, and buried at a depth of approximately 3 feet. Being buried in this way is the most natural way for your body to become part of the ecosystem.

We strongly encourage people to include one of our conservation partners in their estate planning. In return for doing so, you get a greatly reduced cost of purchasing a site.

To reserve your burial site, submit the application and fee to Spirit Sanctuary, PO Box 42, Essex, NY 12936. Once you have enrolled you will then be put in touch with our Spirit Sanctuary Doula, who will arrange a 1.5 hour phone orientation call or in-person meeting with you depending on location. The cost of this orientation is included in your plot purchase. In this orientation, our doula will review procedures and options for burial at Spirit Sanctuary. Our doula will then send you a written summary of your orientation.

Upon acceptance, you may select a specific burial site or allow the Spirit Sanctuary staff to choose a site when the time comes. Upon selection of a site, the GPS coordinates will be provided for you. Once a site is selected, it will be marked off and reserved for when it is needed. Keep these Spirit Sanctuary documents with your other advance planning documents. We encourage you to document your wishes to be buried at Spirit Sanctuary in your advance planning documents and to appoint an Agent of Disposition.

As death approaches, please contact Spirit Sanctuary as soon as possible so we can prepare the gravesite and plan the burial itself. If you wish, the family is welcome to participate in the opening or closing of the grave. Generally, we need about 48 hours to be ready for a burial.

Can someone who has not planned ahead still be buried at Spirit Sanctuary?

Yes, but if a plot was not purchased prior to death, you or the family will need to do so before we can proceed with the burial. Making burial plans at time of death is much more difficult for everybody involved. We strongly encourage planning ahead, to avoid delays and unnecessary stress at a difficult time.

In addition we offer a reduced price on burial when a bequest is made to one or more of our conservation partners prior to the death. (See question below: **“How much does burial at Spirit Sanctuary cost?”**) Planning ahead allows you an opportunity to arrange the donation(s) to conservation group(s) rather than paying the full price.

Can someone purchase a plot at Spirit Sanctuary for someone else?

If you are someone's agent of disposition or next of kin and know that they want to be buried at Spirit Sanctuary or have a green burial, then yes. But, if someone is unable to make burial arrangements for

themselves and has documented wishes for another type of burial, then you are obligated to follow their written wishes; and we can not make arrangements for burial at Spirit Sanctuary.

How much does burial at Spirit Sanctuary cost?

The cost of burial at Spirit Sanctuary is \$1200 if you have previously enrolled with Spirit Sanctuary and included one or more of our partner conservation groups in your estate planning. If you have not, you can be buried at Spirit Sanctuary for \$3500.

We use this two-tiered structure to encourage people to make sure their final act is one of giving- both of their body to Nature, and of some of their financial assets to conserve the ecosystem their body will become a part of.

A portion of the money from burials at Spirit Sanctuary goes to cover the cost of labor in preparing gravesites, paying our staff, and administration of the green cemetery. Anything in excess of our operational budget will further our educational and land conservation efforts. As a private cemetery, our mission is to provide people with a burial that honors their wish to “live green, die green.” The financial gifts of people who choose to be buried at Spirit Sanctuary is a reflection of this philosophy.

Can someone be buried at Spirit Sanctuary if they want to be embalmed?

No. Green burial involves doing as little as possible to interfere with the natural process of decomposition that occurs when a body is placed in healthy soil. Embalming, even with so-called “green embalming fluid”, disrupts that process.

Embalming is never required by law, even when transporting a body across state lines (with the exception of Arkansas). However, some common carriers do require embalming if the body is coming from Kansas, Indiana, or Minnesota.

Please note that transport by airplane, or even long car drives, does leave a substantial carbon footprint that is not offset by green burial. If such arrangements are necessary for the body to reach Spirit Sanctuary, it is best for the environment to consider green burial closer to home.

Can someone be buried at Spirit Sanctuary if they want to be cremated?

For many years cremation was thought to be better for the environment than conventional burial practices such as embalming. However, we now know that a large amount of fossil fuel is used in each cremation, releasing various pollutants including greenhouse gasses, which are upsetting our planet’s fragile climate. Furthermore, cremains (ashes) have a pH of about 11.4 and are devoid of any nutrients accessible to the soil. For these reasons, we strongly discourage people who want to be buried at Spirit Sanctuary from choosing cremation. If a person previously enrolled in Spirit Sanctuary needs to be cremated for some reason then they may still take advantage of the burying of their ashes in their plot.

Can someone bury their pet at Spirit Sanctuary?

Yes, those eligible for burial at Spirit Sanctuary are also welcome to bury their household pets there as well. If you are not eligible for low cost burial through donation to one of our conservation partners, you should donate at least \$100 to one of the conservation organizations on our list and notify the Sanctuary Board of your intentions. Pet owners are required to open and close the graves themselves in

the presence of a Spirit Sanctuary representative. Markers of natural stone and under 100 lbs may be placed, but they cannot include any words or symbols.

Can a family plot be selected at Spirit Sanctuary?

Absolutely! If purchasing more than one site at time, you are welcome to buy adjacent sites if you wish to be buried in close proximity to your loved ones. Each member of your family will have their own burial site and each burial will be treated as though it was a single enrollment. You may select a site upon enrollment or leave it up to the cemetery staff. Once a site is selected, it will be marked off and reserved for when it is needed.

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 all people, not just those purchasing family plots, to come to Spirit Sanctuary and choose their plot for themselves if possible. A Spirit Sanctuary representative will meet you there to help you consider your options.

What happens at the time of death?

We ask that you notify Spirit Sanctuary as soon as possible when death is imminent by calling Spirit Sanctuary office. This allows us to prepare for the burial and be ready on your schedule. We do allow for families to assist in the opening (digging) and closing of the grave, but the opening is hard work, so be prepared. A staff person will be available for assistance as needed, but do let us know ahead of time if you are planning to participate in the opening and closing.

The deceased will need to be transported to Spirit Sanctuary. To do this it requires that you have a Burial-Transport permit, which can be obtained from your town or city clerk with a Death Certificate, or can be arranged by a funeral director, as explained in the orientation.

If you live in New York State you will be required to work with a funeral director to obtain the Burial-Transport Permit. Additionally, if you live in New York and the person dies in a hospital, nursing home, or similar institution, you must use a funeral director to remove the body from the premises, even if you are going to care for it yourself. We recommend that you contact a funeral director who is familiar with our process. A list will be found on our website.

You have the right to care for your own dead. This means you may bathe, cool, and prepare the body for burial yourself. Basic education about caring for your own dead is covered in your orientation.

Keep in mind that where someone dies may impact your choices- nursing homes and hospitals will not allow a dead body to stay in its bed for more than a few hours. In these cases, you will need access to a home or apartment in which to care for the body, or have to hire a funeral director.

Bodies must arrive at Spirit Sanctuary in good condition, so please follow the protocol for proper cooling techniques and transportation methods explained in your orientation.

Burial at Spirit Sanctuary does not preclude any church or other formal ceremonies taking place before or at or after burial. You are also welcome to choose family directed ceremonies or funerals.

When the body and family is ready for burial, there are many options for transporting the body to the cemetery and then to the gravesite. Motorized vehicles are not allowed in Spirit Sanctuary itself, but families can arrange to have a horse-drawn wagon carry the body to gravesite from the pre-burial gathering or entrance, or else can carry the body themselves from the entrance. If carrying the body yourselves, please have four to six strong, healthy, people available (if this is not feasible for you, please tell us in advance so we can arrange for our directors to assist). Our grave digger will have the grave open and the area around the grave readied for families to gather at the gravesite. Remember, this is wild (though gentle) land, so you'll be more comfortable in outdoor-wear.

Bodies are lowered into the grave by hand. Again, we recommend four to six strong people participate in the lowering, and we can arrange to have our staff assist if needed. We encourage families to take their time at the gravesite and at least begin the process of closing the grave themselves; however, our grave-digger can also close the grave if the family prefers so.

Once the family is done at the gravesite, they are free to go. Families and loved ones are welcome to visit Spirit Sanctuary and the gravesite at any time. Because all of the dirt that was dug to make the grave is replaced, a small mound will mark the gravesite. This mound subsides over time. We encourage letting nature select which plants will cover the gravesite, or transplanting small native plants from the immediate area of the grave, however, families are allowed to plant native species of flowers and/or a tree on the gravesite if they wish. Anything planted on or around the gravesite must be a locally sourced native species, excepting that we welcome recovery of American Chestnut and other regionally-native trees that may in the future be knocked back by human-introduced pathogens, even if the restoration sources are not in our immediate area. Please see our list of plants and nurseries on our website for approved plants.

If we choose to keep the body at home until burial, how should it be prepared for burial at Spirit Sanctuary?

This is covered in detail in your orientation. If you plan to care for your loved one at home, burial must take place within four days of death or else the body must be transferred to a funeral home for storage. Proper care of the body after death, though not difficult, must be taken very seriously.

You may prepare the body yourself, or you may hire a funeral director to do it. Please be sure that the funeral director is aware that they are preparing a body for a green burial. (This is covered in your orientation.)

Bodies buried at Spirit Sanctuary are not embalmed and should be wearing clothes of natural material (if possible). Please remove anything that you do not want buried with the person such as eye-glasses and rings. Please do not use any sort of plastic decorations on the body, container, or shroud.

Bodies can be in a biodegradable container (such as a pine or other softwood box or "alternative," cardboard, container). Some metal in the container (such as hinges or handles) is acceptable, but we prefer all natural containers.

You can see a list of local and regional providers of appropriate burial containers as well as view videos of people making pine caskets on our website.

Bodies can also be shrouded. A shrouded body does not need to be dressed, but if it is, please try to make sure that both the clothing and the shroud are made of natural materials. You can purchase a shroud or use bedding, or a family quilt, as long as they are of natural material.

You can see a list of shroud providers here as well as view videos of the shrouding process on our website.

Burying a deceased person naked at Spirit Sanctuary is acceptable, provided that is the expressed wish of the person. Everyone at the ceremony should be aware and respectful of their choice.

Can I have a marker or other decorations at my gravesite?

Anytime after the closing of the grave, friends and family may choose, if they wish, to decorate the burial site with natural items from the Spirit Sanctuary or nearby locations (moss, wood, plants, natural stone). If a marker is desired it must be of wood or a naturally occurring local stone, and weigh less than 100 pounds. Letters and numbers may be carved on the stone but the stone itself should retain its natural shape. No unnatural items (such as plastic flower pots, Mylar balloons, etc) are to be left at Spirit Sanctuary overnight. Any items in violation will be removed without notice.

Spirit Sanctuary will not “maintain” gravesites. The intention is for nature to reclaim the burial areas. Most likely this will result in a forest. 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. We will not remove, trap, or kill native animals that also call Spirit Sanctuary ‘home.’ For instance, beaver may re-appropriate trees for their own purposes, this is a natural process and will not be discouraged. Wire may be placed around special trees, if desired. Not all areas of the sanctuary are going to be easily accessible due weather conditions. Spirit Sanctuary does not guarantee access to gravesites due to snow, mud, water, or other natural occurrences.

We encourage letting nature select which plants will cover the gravesite, or transplanting small native plants from the immediate area of the grave. However if you feel strongly compelled to purchase a plant for the gravesite it must be a plant that is native to Essex County, New York. (Not just a “native” plant sold in Essex County.) If using a purchased plant rinse the soil from the roots and carry it to Spirit Sanctuary “bare root.” This will help prevent unwanted organisms from entering the conservation area. Please see our approved list of plants on our website for guidance.

Can someone be buried at Spirit Sanctuary if they are not a resident of Essex County, NY?

Yes, in fact, you do not even need to be a resident of New York State to be buried at Spirit Sanctuary. In your orientation, our Spirit Sanctuary Doula will review the steps necessary to transport your body to Spirit Sanctuary from nearby states.

What conservation groups are on in your list of partners to whom donations or bequests should be made?

Our lead partners in Split Rock Wildway conservation include:

Northeast Wilderness Trust, website and contact information (will be added once on website)
Champlain Area Trails
Eddy Foundation
Adirondack Land Trust
Adirondack Council
Protect the Adirondacks
Adirondack Wild
Old-Growth Forest Network
The Rewilding Institute
Wildlands Network

You may also, or instead, choose any legitimate non-profit land and/or wildlife conservation group. However, with groups other than those listed above, Spirit Sanctuary has not beforehand explained how the green burial/charitable donation process works; so there may be some extra work on your end.

If you are from outside of the Northeast, we do ask that you consider if Spirit Sanctuary is truly the right choice for you. Long car drives or plane trips to transport the body have a substantial carbon footprint that is not offset by donations or green burial. If you would like to find a conservation cemetery closer to you, please review the directory on the Green Burial Naturally website.

What should someone bring to a burial at Spirit Sanctuary? What should they wear?

There are three things that must be present for a burial at Spirit Sanctuary, the Burial-Transport Permit, the body (prepared for a green burial), and yourself.

Spirit Sanctuary will provide everything necessary for the burial and, with advance notice, even additional people to assist in carrying and lowering the body. We do not have tents, so bring umbrellas if it is raining and wear hats and sunscreen if it is sunny. Burials take place between sunrise and sunset, but you may wish to bring a flashlight in order to make your way safely out of the cemetery in low light.

You should bring any native and natural items that will play a role in the ceremony at the grave or wish to leave after the grave is closed.

If you wish you can also bring a piece of steel to place in the grave. If you have a metal detector this will make sure you can accurately find the center of the grave within the GPS coordinates of the gravesite.

While we are used to dressing formally for funerals, please consider that Spirit Sanctuary is outdoors and not maintained, except for the main trail. Sneakers or hiking shoes will be a better fit than dress shoes or heels. If you are planning to assist in digging the grave be sure to wear something appropriate for outdoor labor. If you are going to assist in opening or closing the grave, wear something appropriate for outdoor labor and bring work-work gloves that fit you are a great idea. We recommend dressing in a way that feels respectful to the person, the surroundings, the season, and the ceremony.

What if someone dies in the winter? Can they still be buried at Spirit Sanctuary?

Yes, Spirit Sanctuary is open for burial year-round. Generally, in winter, we can shovel a path to the gravesite and around the grave. If necessary our gravedigger will thaw the ground to open the grave.

He will pile the soil from the grave on top of the snow to facilitate closing the grave. He will not shovel snow from the grave once it is closed.

What if someone dies on a holiday?

Death has no holidays and neither do we at Spirit Sanctuary.

What if someone changes their mind about being buried at Spirit Sanctuary?

As a consumer everyone has the right to change their mind about where they want to be buried. Please notify our office if you need to make this change.

Please note that all burials at Spirit Sanctuary are considered a final mode of disposition. This means we will not disinter a body without a court order.

What support does Spirit Sanctuary provide to people considering burial there?

The Spirit Sanctuary Directors are available to talk you through the process of choosing a plot and making payments. They also help in preparing gravesites, assisting at funerals, running the website and answering emails. As a small group of people passionate about conservation and rewilding, any one of our directors will be happy to talk to you about why burial at Spirit Sanctuary is an important part of supporting our environment.

We have a “Spirit Sanctuary Doula,” Michelle Acciavatti, who is also an End of Life specialist. As part of your commitment to purchasing a plot, Michelle will arrange a 1.5 hour phone orientation call or in-person orientation meeting with you. In this orientation she will review the procedure of burial at Spirit Sanctuary, what to do when death is near, your option to care for your own dead or use a funeral director (and what to say to a funeral director), review the forms you need to sign, go over your options for ceremony, transport, and what happens in the cemetery, and answer questions you have. She will provide a written summary of your conversation so that you can refer to it when the time comes.

Michelle is also available to be hired through her business Ending Well (www.ending-well.com) as an Advance Planner to assist you in appointing an agent of disposition and including your wishes to be buried at Spirit Sanctuary in your advance planning documents. She is also available to be hired as a End of Life Doula and/or Home Funeral Guide to support you/your loved one near, at, and after time of death 24 hours a day 7 days a week. She is available in person to families in Vermont, western New Hampshire, eastern or western Massachusetts, and northeastern New York and by Skype/phone in other areas. Michelle is also available to be hired to help you develop and carry out any rituals you may wish to observe prior to burial, during burial, and afterwards.

Such arrangements with Michelle need to be made prior to imminent death and the cost is not covered in the price of your plot. Michelle does work on a sliding scale and strives to make her services accessible to all families. If you have purchased a plot at Spirit Sanctuary and want to make arrangements or learn more about Michelle’s services, email: michelle@ending-well.com

What if I still have questions?

If you want to learn more about burial at Spirit Sanctuary than the information we provide here, and on our website, please call toll free 877-243-7935 or direct 518-278-7502. A Spirit Sanctuary director will then talk to you about choosing a site, review the price structure, and answer questions you might have about choosing Spirit Sanctuary.

Other Resources:

The National Home Funeral Alliance keeps a directory of End of Life Doulas and Home Funeral Guides should you wish to find someone in your own area to support you through your loved one's dying process and/or in caring for your own dead. Visit: www.homefuneralalliance.org

End of Life Doulas and Home Funeral Guide trainings can vary widely, so we also suggest that you ensure the person you choose to work with is familiar with green burial.

The Funeral Consumers Alliance provides resources on state laws about funeral and burial laws and your rights as a funeral consumer. If you suspect that the information you are hearing is incorrect, please contact them. Remember green burial is legal in all 50 states. Visit: <https://funerals.org/>

Our list of approved stones, plants, and nurseries is available on our website.

For additional resources including books and articles about green burial and conservation, links to hospice, and advance care planning please see our website.