



Farewell to a Beloved Pet

Earth's Memorial to a Pet's Passing

by Sandra Murphy

The American Pet Products Association estimates Americans collectively spent \$69.5 million on our 235 million mammal, avian and reptile pets, as well as 158 million pet fish, in 2017. It's not surprising that end-of-life planning for a devoted family companion is a solemn endeavor.

Burial in a box or blanket in the backyard used to be the predominant way to deal with pet remains. As people and pet populations have grown, many municipalities now have ordinances against the practice. Instead, good options exist that protect and preserve the planet these animals so enjoyed.

Innovative Containers

Kay Winters, a blogger at *PawsAndPines.com*, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, mothers a dog, Clover, and two cats, Chuckie and Mittens. "When they pass away, I plan to bury them in biodegradable mushroom bags," she says. "It has mushroom and other organisms infused into it to help with natural decomposition, cleanse any environmental toxins in the body and nourish the nearby soil."

Another biodegradable container is a pod that contains nutrient-rich soil, a seed and the pet's ashes to nourish the resulting plant, tree or shrub. It's a lovely way to remember the pet and replenish Earth's greenspace.

Aquamation or Cremation

Veterinary offices commonly arrange for the pet's body to be sent to a crematorium, with ashes returned several days later. Using temperatures from 1,400 to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, these facilities impose a larger carbon footprint than other options.

At-home euthanasia may be beneficial for terminal pets. The animal can remain calm in familiar surroundings with family present. The veterinarian allows time for goodbyes, and when the family is ready, removes the body. "We always place the pets on nice stretchers with a blanket over the body and encourage the family to place toys or flowers with their pet. There's no handing out brochures with photos of urns or upselling. It's respectful of the pet's life," says Veterinarian Mary Gardner, of Yorba Linda, California, co-founder and chief technology officer at Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice, a national network of veterinarians dedicated to end-of-life care.

Gardner is also building an aquamation (alkaline hydrolysis) facility in Boynton Beach, Florida. This alternative to cremation has a far smaller environmental impact because the resulting alkaline water is safe to drain, containing no chemicals or DNA.

Elizabeth Fournier, author of *The Green Burial Guidebook*, owns and operates

Cornerstone Funeral Services and Cremation, in Boring, Oregon, where she periodically receives inquiries about pets. “I’ve received calls over the years for horses, donkeys, sheep and dogs. One family called me for their alpaca. I explained my funeral home was a human-only funeral parlor, but I’d be more than happy to help with a referral,” Fournier says. She offered a choice of flame or water. “They liked the water method because Spunky the Alpaca loved the rain and could drink more water than most of her pasture mates,” she says.

The family let all the other animals at home come by to give Spunky a sniff and a goodbye, and then took her body for bio-cremation. “They took her ashes home in a ceramic pig cookie jar,” says Fournier. “It’s my favorite story.”

“The zero-emission aquamation process creates one-tenth the carbon footprint of traditional, flame-based cremation and enables 20 percent more ashes to be returned to the family, allowing for a lasting contribution to be made to the Earth in honor of a beloved pet,” says Christie Cornelius, the founding doctor of veterinary medicine at Last Wishes Compassionate Comfort Care for Pets, in Houston, Texas.

Eternal Reefs, Inc., in Sarasota, Florida, mixes environmentally friendly concrete with cremains to form a gigantic reef ball, which is then placed on the ocean floor to replenish naturally diminishing reef systems and provide a permanent underwater memorial. Originally designed for human use, some owners have asked for pets to be included. To reduce costs, families are encouraged to hold their pet’s cremated remains for the appropriate time when they are memorializing a human loved one. Recorded GPS coordinates facilitate future visits to the area.

Whether using earth, fire or water, there are many ways to honor a pet’s lifelong devotion and lessen its final carbon footprint to protect Earth’s natural health and beauty.

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