How Green Is My Grave?
by Karen van Vuuren

I got my first glimpse of a natural burial ground in 2014, courtesy of Rupert Callender, then UK green funeral director of the year. Atop the most verdant of Devonshire hills, Rupert enthusiastically bid me survey the land he and his partner, Claire, managed for a local land trust. The site includes a simple wood shelter for ceremonies, a fire pit around which funeral-goers often reminisced, and a most glorious vista of sheep-dotted pastures and the River Dart.

Green burial seems to make sense to many people in the UK, hence the extraordinary number of natural cemeteries certified by the Association of Natural Burial Grounds, UK. Some of these are unadorned, unmanicured, a gift for Mother Nature to do with as she will. Others allow certain approved markers and monuments.

The US Green Burial Council certifies—among other types of natural cemeteries—what it calls “hybrid” burial grounds. This spring, I met the dynamic manager of a historic cemetery in Boston who has applied for hybrid certification. Meandering amidst the Victorian colossi of Mount Auburn, Candace Currie pointed out a few of the recent eight natural burials she has overseen. The sites are situated between existing graves in spaces deemed inaccessible for vault-lowering equipment. Notwithstanding the obvious financial benefit of selling otherwise unusable space, Candace appears genuinely committed to offering green options at Mount Auburn. The cemetery board also endorses sustainable landscaping practices and nature conservation.

The spectrum of natural burial is broad—from conservation burial to hybrids that offer green alongside conventional burial. Clearly, there’s also a degree of greenwashing out there, and that’s why certifying bodies applying standards can provide transparency and protection for the consumer.

In this issue of NTM, we spotlight what’s happening with natural burial in the US, while including voices from the UK and Australia. We feature some of the pioneers in the movement—Billy Campbell of Memorial Ecosystems, Cynthia Beal of the Natural Burial Company, Joe Sehee of Green Burial Council International, and Rosie Inman-Cook of the Natural Death Centre’s Association of Natural Burial Grounds, UK. Not all these movers and shakers see eye to eye, but we at NTM are grateful for the difference they are making to the landscape of death.