

# Why You Shouldn't Bury Your Pet in Your Backyard

When a beloved pet passes, many owners opt to bury their pet's body in their backyard. While this may seem like an ideal option, there are actually some risks associated with it. Find out why it may not be your best choice.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Backyard burial is a popular option for grieving pet parents, but it poses certain risks to other pets and wildlife
- The drugs used in veterinary euthanasia procedures can remain in a buried pet's body for up to a year and have the potential to sicken and even kill animals who might dig up the remains
- Alternatives to backyard burials include pet crematoriums and cemeteries, and donating the body to science
- Another option is aquamation, or water cremation, which is eco-friendly and a gentler, more natural process that allows the body to return to the earth

**Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published July 6, 2019.**

Many pet parents bury the bodies of beloved furry family members in the backyard after they cross the Rainbow Bridge, and while this may seem like an ideal option, there are actually some risks associated with it. There are almost no discussions about the downsides of backyard burials, so it would be helpful to give the subject some consideration today.

## Euthanized Pets Buried in Backyard Graves Can Pose a Risk to Other Pets and Wildlife

Grieving pet parents bury their animal companions in the backyard for lots of reasons. Often, they simply want their pet's remains nearby. Some hold burial services at the gravesite much like when a human family member dies, complete with a grave marker with the pet's name on it.

Some people can't bear the thought of leaving their deceased pet in the hands of veterinary staff or a stranger at a crematorium for "disposal." Others can't afford the expense. But the problem with backyard burial of pets is that it can pose a danger to other pets and also wildlife.

*"Most pets are put to sleep with an extremely concentrated anesthetic agent, which results in a very peaceful death (hence the term euthanasia, which means 'good death');" says Rachel Allavena, Ph.D., veterinary pathologist and associate professor at The University of Queensland In Australia, in an article in The Conversation.*

*"However, this drug, pentobarbital, persists in the buried body of the pet for up to a year. Any animal scavenging on the remains will be poisoned by the euthanasia solution."<sup>1</sup>*

Allavena discusses two cases from her own experience to illustrate what can happen. In the first, a family's euthanized pet mouse was buried in the backyard. "The family's terrier dug up and ate the mouse and was comatose in intensive care for nearly a week," she writes.

In the second instance, two farm dogs got hold of bones from a cow that had been euthanized months before. One dog died and the other became seriously ill. In addition, "If your pet dies of a disease which could be spread to other animals or even people," says Allavena, "their body might also pose a risk," since certain disease outbreaks, for example, parvovirus, can quickly spread from dog to dog.

## **Alternatives to Backyard Burial of Pets**

An obvious alternative to home burial of pets are pet crematoriums and cemeteries, which are widely available in the U.S., and may offer a variety of options and price ranges.

"Professional burial or cremation avoids the risks of environmental contamination or disease that might occur with backyard burial," says Allavena. She typically chooses cremation for her own pets and then buries their ashes under a memorial tree in her garden. Another option, inspired by Allavena's professional specialty, veterinary pathology, is to donate your pet's body to science for research and veterinary training.

*"My job is to conduct autopsies on animals to determine their cause of death," writes Allavena. "We also use the knowledge and samples we get from the autopsies to conduct research to improve our understanding of diseases and treatments in both animals and people."*

*"Our pets make excellent 'models' of diseases in both pets and people, allowing scientists to study the development and progression of a disease and develop new treatments."*

If the idea of donating your pet's body to science interests you, Allavena recommends asking your veterinarian for information on local options. In most large cities, this will be a veterinary school at a university. Donated bodies of pets help university researchers study both pet and human diseases and also provide a resource for veterinary school instruction in anatomy, surgery and pathology.

*"Donated pets provide my students with a valuable understanding of how disease affects the body," says Allavena. "Further, we report the autopsy findings back to the pet's veterinarian. This information is crucial to vets who want to confirm diagnoses, and for giving grieving owners some closure."*

If you do decide to bury your euthanized pet at home, first make sure it's legal where you live. Allavena also suggests enclosing the body in a container that will prevent other animals from getting access to it.

## **Zero-Emission Cremation**

For those of you concerned about the environmental costs of traditional burial or cremation of pets, there's a greener alternative to consider. Traditional burials involve adding wood, steel and embalming fluid (some 60,000 tons of steel and 4.8 million gallons of embalming fluid for human burials annually) to the ground, while cremation is a source of toxic air pollution.<sup>2</sup>

A greener alternative is aquamation — water cremation — which uses a process called alkaline hydrolysis. Alkaline hydrolysis is similar to natural body decomposition, but at an accelerated pace. Remains are placed into an aquamation machine, which uses water, temperature and alkalinity — essentially hot, pressurized water and lye — to break down the body over a period of about 20 hours.

The fluid aquamation produces is a coffee-colored "neutral liquid solution of amino acids, peptides, and sugars that is suitable for release onto the earth," according to Guardian Pet Aquamation in Loveland, Colorado, while the remaining solids are the mineral ash of bones, which are ground down into a white-colored, sand-like ash.<sup>3</sup> Some people choose to have the ashes returned to them in an urn or placed into a piece of jewelry.

Others spread the ashes over their pet's favorite park, while some aquamation centers will spread ashes over their land for you and offer owners a chance to come back to visit, similar to a cemetery. "It is not uncommon to see owners roaming the land [at Guardian Pet Aquamation] on the weekends to visit their pets who have passed," the Coloradoan reports.<sup>4</sup>

Compared to conventional cremation, aquamation has zero emissions, low energy consumption and one-tenth the carbon footprint, at a similar cost. Jerry Shevick, founder of Peaceful Pets Aquamation in Newbury Park, California, wrote in Dogster:

*"What's even more staggering is that it uses one-twentieth of the energy, cutting natural gas use and carbon dioxide emissions by 90[%] and electricity by 66[%]. It is also mercury-free. Think about this: The amount of energy a crematory uses to incinerate a cat would heat your house for three days in minus-15-degree weather. The comparison isn't even close."*<sup>5</sup>

Also striking are the differences in resulting mineral ash from aquamation compared to cremation. While cremation ashes may be coarse and discolored by carbon, the ash from aquamation is finer and often compared to sand.

*"The ash is completely sterile, so it can be buried or dispersed without any issues or problems," according to Peaceful Pets Aquamation. "And, because of its sand-like appearance, many clients find it more comforting to handle."*<sup>6</sup>

## **A Gentler, More Natural Process That Allows the Body to Return to the Earth**

In addition to its eco-friendliness, some pet owners are drawn to aquamation because it seems a gentler, more natural process that allows the body to return to the earth, as opposed to, for example, embalming, which uses an unnatural process to preserve the body, and the use of caskets, which separate the body from the earth.

Bio-Response Solutions, which manufactures alkaline hydrolysis systems for use with both human and pet remains, explains it this way:

*"Alkaline hydrolysis is essentially an accelerated version of what takes place in natural decomposition. A combination of gentle water flow, temperature, and alkalinity is used to accelerate the natural course of tissue hydrolysis. At the end of the process the body has been returned to its natural form, dissolved in the water. Remember, our bodies are 65[%] water to begin with! Similar to cremation, the only solid remains are the mineral ash of the bones."*<sup>7</sup>

### **Sources and References**

<sup>1</sup> [The Conversation, March 18, 2019](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Reuters May 11, 2013](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Guardian Pet Aquamation, What Is Aquamation?](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Coloradoan September 18, 2018](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Dogster August 7, 2024](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Peaceful Pets Aquamation](#)

<sup>7</sup> [BioResponseFuneral.com, FAQs](#)

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