

GREEN CEMETERIES

—

FOR NATURE AND FOR PEOPLE

Practical Advice for
Cemetery Managers

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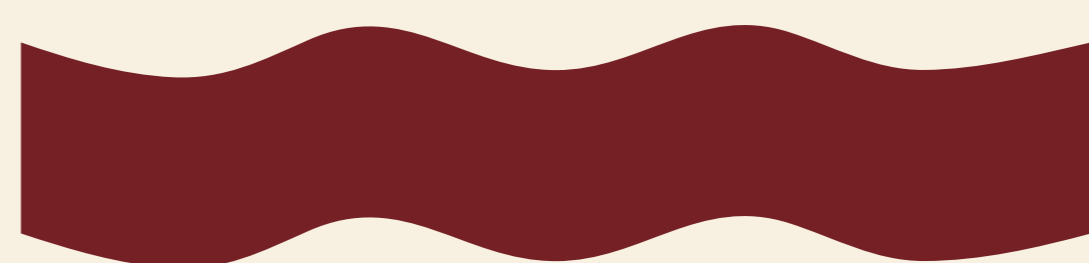
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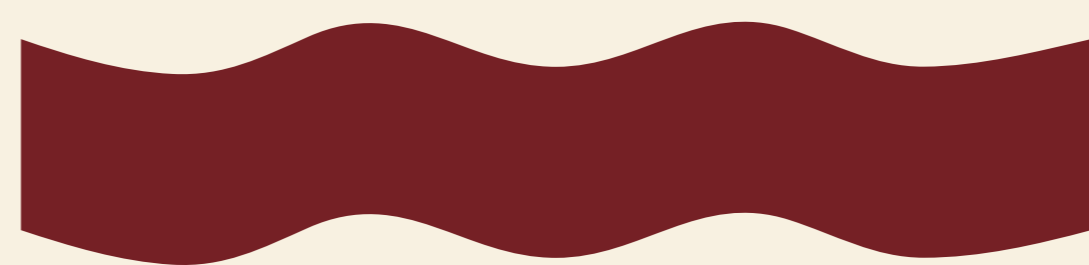
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PREFACE



CEMETERIES TODAY

In our fast-changing day and age, cemeteries seem to remain these pockets of peace where time passes a little slower, where progress takes its time. As if all the goings-ons of our world took place somewhere out there, beyond the cemetery walls—here, “the good old days” still linger. They feel no need to draw attention to themselves or to please anyone; they simply stand there quietly, waiting for the day they can serve us. Because of this, they are sought out by people who wish to find a moment of quiet, to reflect, and to discover a bit of inner calm and peace before returning to the busy world outside beyond the cemetery walls.

It might actually seem that cemeteries are meant to remain just as idyllic as they are, that nothing needs to be changed, and that there’s no reason to read a handbook about them. We’re glad you’re still reading—perhaps, like us, you sense that settling for such a conclusion would be far too simple. We are convinced that there is much that can be done differently and better in the care of cemeteries and the services they offer, often in response to the changing needs of our time. Factors such as climate change and the unspoken needs of the bereaved play a significant role in this.

It is then up to us, cemetery managers and caretakers, to work together to find a balance when implementing these changes—ensuring that these places do not lose their unique character, while continuing to offer a kind of pause in time for those who need it. At the same time, we should strive to realize the potential these spaces have to mitigate the impacts of climate change and to help our society come to terms with death and dying.

THE CHANGING NEEDS OF THE BEREAVED

People do not hold cemeteries to the same standard as the public services we use on a regular basis. We only come into contact with cemetery services a few times in our lives, and usually in a state of mind where expressing dissatisfaction or demanding changes is simply not the priority. Occasionally, a complaint is made to the cemetery, but it usually concerns routine operations—a leaky faucet or a chipped piece of a gravestone. People voice their concerns when it comes to issues of cemetery aesthetics related to the accumulation of decorations on graves and the problem of cemetery waste.

However, it is unlikely that anyone demands a more comprehensive change in the approach to funerals and care for the bereaved. And it is even less likely that such a proposal would be taken into consideration. If someone feels dissatisfied with how a funeral went, they will most likely keep their unpleasant experience to themselves or only share it with their family on a drive back home. This is often followed by a rationalization that funerals are not supposed to be pleasant and that one simply has to accept this.

People do not have high expectations of funeral services and often view them as an unavoidable necessity that they must somehow endure. Here, we find ourselves in quite an encouraging position—we have the opportunity to show people that even dealing with funeral services can be a pleasant experience, and that it is possible to leave a funeral with a sense of grace, relief, and gratitude. In this handbook, we would like to share some small examples from our practice as well as major conceptual changes that accommodate the bereaved in this regard.

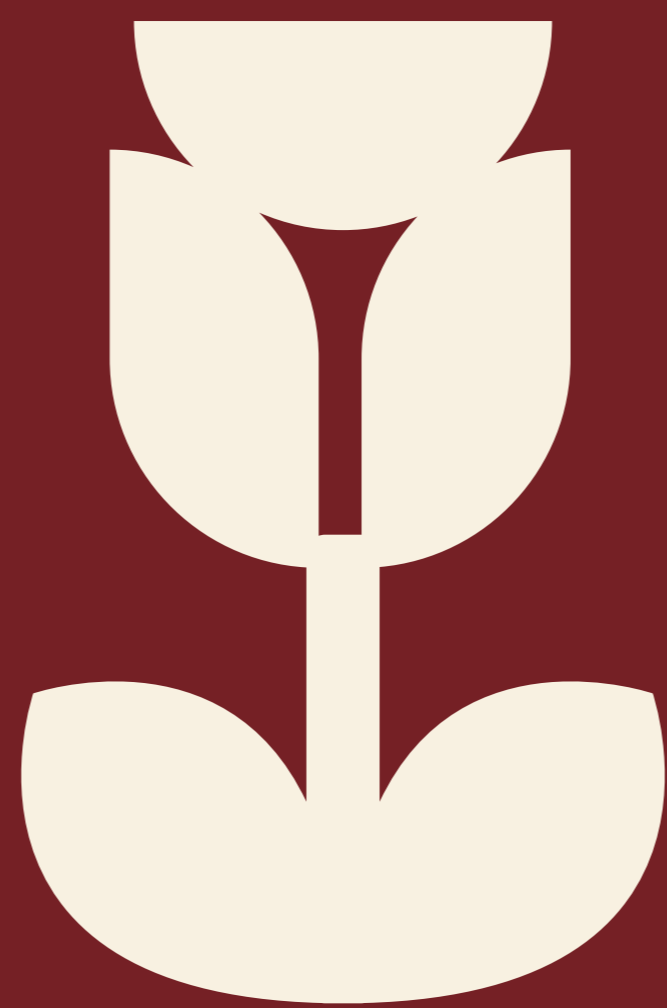
THE CHANGING CLIMATE

The climate is changing, and we can observe it in cemeteries year by year—grass yellows more quickly in the summer, water evaporates faster, and the conifers that once proudly defined our cemetery landscapes are gradually deteriorating. In this regard, changes in cemetery greenery management are inevitable if we wish to preserve their aesthetic quality and dignified appearance. This handbook summarizes various approaches to achieving that goal.

We are convinced, however, that cemeteries can do much more in the fight against climate change than simply take the necessary measures to maintain the status quo. As green spaces near human settlements, cemeteries have great potential to preserve a pleasant, cool climate on hot summer days, to serve as an oasis amidst heated neighborhoods, and to become sought-after spaces for everyday leisure. There is already a clear trend of increasing numbers of visitors coming to these spaces to relax in the pleasant shade of greenery—whether parents with strollers, runners, or schools and kindergartens on outings. This handbook will guide you on how cemeteries can be adapted to support this potential.

In addition, cemeteries are undoubtedly places that can help preserve and even expand biodiversity in areas where this issue is often overlooked. Space for nature around human settlements is shrinking, yet many plant and animal species can find an ideal refuge in cemeteries—and we have the opportunity to offer it to them. The following chapter explains which plant species are suitable to cultivate and how to provide space for wildlife.

Finally, cemetery visitors are generally emotionally open, more sensitive to their surroundings, and more receptive to their influence. It is up to us to provide an environment where they can feel safe and find sufficient space for mourning. From our experience, natural settings possess exactly these qualities—they can offer comfort and solace, time for remembrance, and opportunities for renewal. This connection with nature, which cemeteries can awaken or deepen in people, may, in a broader context, also influence the search for collective solutions to the climate crisis.



**CARE FOR
NATURE IN
CEMETERIES
AND SUPPORTING
BIODIVERSITY**

Vilém Jurek

Cemeteries are places of reverence and remembrance, but they are also becoming increasingly valuable pockets of nature in the cities.

With careful maintenance of the greenery, they become a refuge for many species of plants and animals. This section summarizes the basic principles and practices of nature–friendly cemetery maintenance and ways to promote biodiversity while maintaining respect for the memory of the deceased.



The author of this section shows protected wood anemones at the Central Cemetery in Brno (photo: Vilem Jurek)

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF CARE

Managing cemetery greenery requires a particular and sensitive approach that respects the reverent atmosphere of the space.

What are the main principles of care?

- ➔ **Respect for Reverence and Tranquility:** We carry out all work in a way that does not disturb the reverent character of the cemetery. We avoid noisy or extensive interventions during funerals or important holidays (All Souls' Day, etc.).
- ➔ **Appropriate Timing of Work:** We plan maintenance outside of major holidays and well in advance. For example, we clean and prepare the cemetery in time before All Souls' Day.
- ➔ **Minimizing Chemicals:** We use chemical agents (herbicides, fertilizers) only when absolutely necessary. We do not want to unnecessarily endanger the surrounding nature or pollute the soil and water.
- ➔ **Tree Monitoring:** We regularly check the condition of trees for reasons of safety and to ensure timely intervention. Early identification of dry branches, diseases, or pests helps prevent accidents and plan necessary treatment.
- ➔ **Planning and Professionally Trained Staff:** We plan care systematically and carry it out with professionally trained staff. Employees are trained in nature–friendly practices and are respectful towards the cemetery environment—they are able to maintain order while supporting natural values.

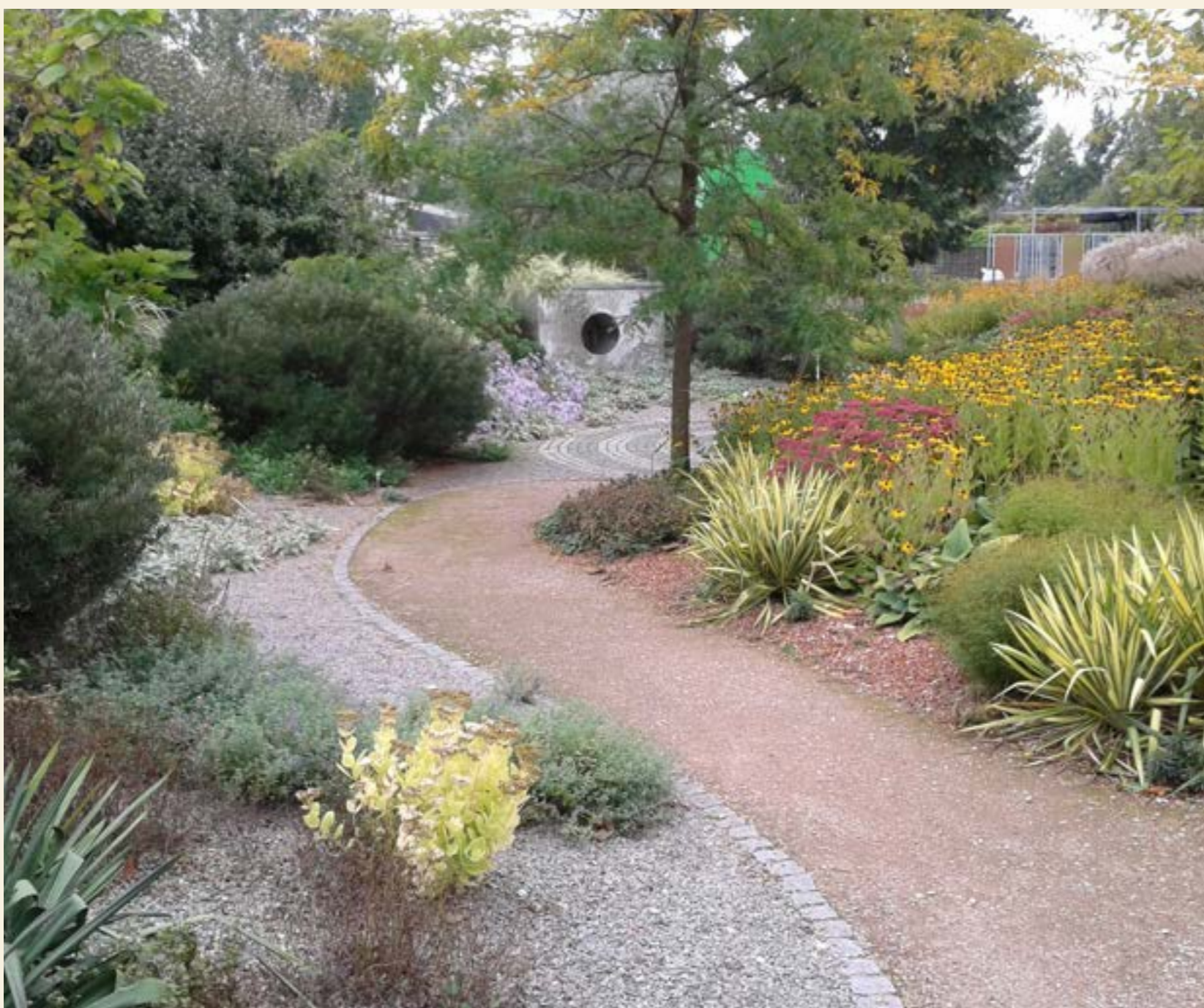
TIP

By following these care principles, you will ensure that the cemetery remains a dignified and respectful place while also being sustainable and friendly to nature.

SPECIFICS OF CEMETERY GREENERY MAINTENANCE

The cemetery environment places special demands on the way greenery is maintained. While intensive care is often used in parks and gardens, a more gentle, extensive approach is desirable in cemeteries.

What does an extensive approach involve?



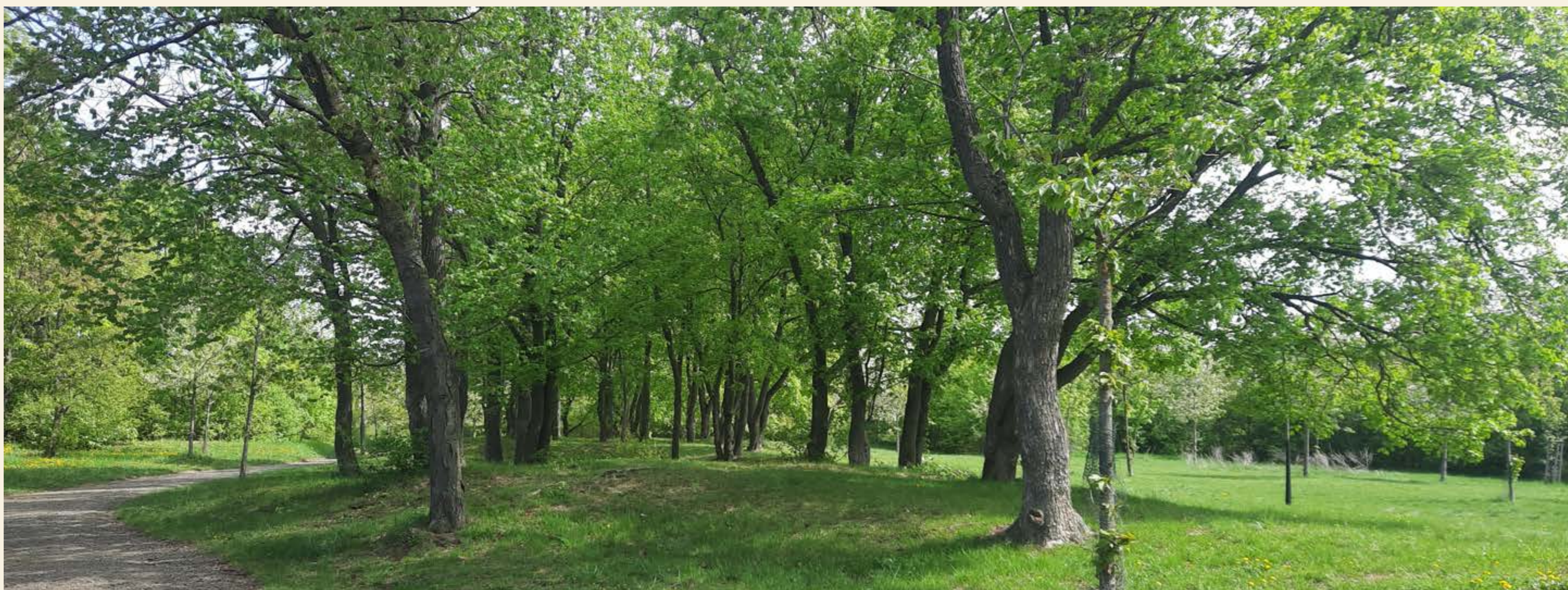
Example of environmental heterogeneity—the more diverse the biotopes, the lower the maintenance requirements, i.e. the intensity of interventions (photo: Vilém Jurek)

→ **Extensive Maintenance and Sensitive Approaches:** We maintain cemetery greenery with an emphasis on low-intensity interventions. Instead of heavy machinery and frequent mowing or cutting, we choose gentler methods of work—for example weeding by hand between graves instead of chemical spraying, or the use of smaller, less noisy tools instead of large machinery. This reduces noise and damage to the surrounding environment.



Tree plantings can be arranged in combination with grassy beds and on various types of soil (in this case, sandy soil) (photo: Vilém Jurek)

→ **Suitable Tree Species and Planting:** We mainly plant species suitable for local conditions, preferably native or long-established species. We avoid monotonous plantings of columnar and weeping cultivars or dark conifers, which were often used in cemeteries in the past and tended to create a gloomy atmosphere. Mixed and species-rich plantings fit better into the local landscape, have higher ecological value, support biodiversity, and increase the resilience and stability of the ecosystem.



➔ **Removal of Invasive Species:** We continuously monitor and remove invasive plants (e.g., tree of heaven) so that they do not out-compete native vegetation and damage graves or buildings.

➔ **Preservation of Aesthetic Appearance:** Even with nature-friendly care, we maintain the dignified appearance of the cemetery. We carefully arrange the extensive areas so that the space looks natural but not neglected. Flower meadows can add variety to the environment, but we make sure they do not look messy—the extensive areas must be appropriately balanced with landscaped areas.

➔ **Long-term Green Space Planning:** We plan the greenery care long-term, keeping in mind the decades ahead. We gradually replace aging trees and shrubs and continuously renew lawns and plantings to ensure that the cemetery's green spaces remain healthy and vibrant for future generations.

Airiness and openness of the environment is one of the important elements in cemeteries (photo: Vilém Jurek)

TIP

The new approach to cemetery maintenance includes extensive areas—parts left with minimal intervention, where extensive maintenance takes place (e.g., less frequent mowing or leaving plants for insects). Thanks to this, the cemetery remains a dignified place while also becoming a space full of life and colour.



The bird feed also included sunflower seeds that had grown near the feeder (photo: Vilém Jurek)

SUPPORTING BIODIVERSITY

One of the main goals of modern cemetery management is to transform cemeteries into havens for diverse lifeforms. We should support a wide range of organisms in cemeteries and create suitable conditions for them—from soil microorganisms and insects to birds and small mammals. Supporting biodiversity is essential because it increases the ecological stability and resilience of the environment; diverse communities are more resistant to drought, pests, and diseases. At the same time, diversity brings aesthetic enrichment—the cemetery is transformed into a lively, pleasant, and truly reverent space which has a positive effect on the bereaved and visitors alike. Care focused on biodiversity is also an adaptation measure to climate change—it promotes water retention, cools the environment, and contributes to the long-term sustainability of the cemetery.

And how do we achieve this?

→ We build a mosaic of different habitats instead of a monotonous lawn or row of thuja trees. We combine sunny flower meadows, shady hiding places under trees, groups of shrubs, and small water features. Diverse biotopes (dry vs. wet areas, dense shrubs vs. open spaces) attract a wider range of plants and animals.



*Mosaic of habitats—a small pool surrounded by lawns
(photo: Kika Procházková)*

→ **We plant a diverse mix of plants**—perennials, fruit bushes, trees rich in nectar and seeds—to provide food and shelter for insects, birds, and other animals for as much of the year as possible.

*Planting fruit trees
(photo: Kika Procházková)*





→ **We deliberately leave some fallen branches, stumps, and tree trunks in place, provided they do not pose a safety hazard. Dead wood is home to many species of insects and provides shelter for other animals. We also leave stable old trees with hollows standing (if it is safe)—hollows are valuable shelters for birds, bats, etc. We place these elements in less conspicuous places so that they do not disturb the reverent character of the space.**

Wood left over from cultivation activities serves as shelter for insects and small mammals (photo: Vilém Jurek)

→ **We leave some processes to nature.** For example, we allow spontaneous regrowth (succession) in suitable areas, creating natural spots with species that we would not have planted ourselves. We also limit pesticides and fertilizers as much as possible so that natural processes can function fully—natural enemies of pests and soil microorganisms keep the ecosystem in balance.



Shady corners with dying trees and ivy (photo: Vilém Jurek)

In addition to these approaches, we increase biodiversity by establishing various natural features. For example, the following can be sensitively placed in the cemetery:



→ **Flower Meadows:** We allow part of the lawn to bloom with wildflowers. This supports pollinators (bees, butterflies) and enlivens the cemetery with colour. We can establish meadows not only in open or peripheral areas, but also on the graves themselves, as an alternative to gravestones.

Established flower meadow (photo: Vilém Jurek)



→ **Insect Hotels and Shelters:** Place houses for solitary bees, bumblebees, and other beneficial insects in quiet locations. Piles of stones, wood, or leaves left in a corner will also serve as shelters for hedgehogs, lizards, or various beetles.

Pile of old wood left with a bumblebee house (photo: Vilém Jurek)

→ **Bird and Bat Houses:** Placing nest boxes on trees encourages birds (e.g., titmice, starlings) to nest and creates shelters for bats. Birds also help control insect populations and delight us with their singing.



Bat house (photo: Vilém Jurek)



A hollow trunk can also be created by cutting too deeply – on the one hand, this is a mistake in tree care, but on the other hand, it creates a new biotope (photo: Vilém Jurek)

TIP

Introduce changes gradually and explain them to visitors in an easy way. This will ensure they are accepted with greater understanding. A sensitive approach will transform the cemetery into a space full of life, where visitors can enjoy the beauty of flowers, butterflies, and birdsong alongside their memories of loved ones. Nature becomes a natural part of reverence and strengthens the spiritual dimension of the place.

Did you know... that an old oak tree with a hollow trunk can provide a home for hundreds of species of insects? Even trees that appear to be dead are extremely valuable to nature.

MOWING AND MAINTENANCE OF GRASSY AREAS

Grassy areas (lawns, meadows, or scattering meadows) make up a significant portion of cemeteries. The method of maintenance has therefore a fundamental impact on the overall character of the environment. Traditionally, lawns are mowed often and to a low height. However, the modern approach is to mow less frequently and more gently, which benefits flowers and animals while also reducing costs.

Classification of Lawns in Cemeteries

Cemetery lawns should be differentiated according to the intensity of care and purpose. The classification is based on the number of mowings per year, their timing, or the possibility of using mosaic mowing. In this way, it is possible to combine the reverent character with support for nature while optimizing maintenance costs.

→ **Intensive (parterre) Lawns**—representative areas, particularly suitable for entrances, around funeral halls, and in the aisles between graves, require frequent mowing (up to 4 times a year) and greater care.

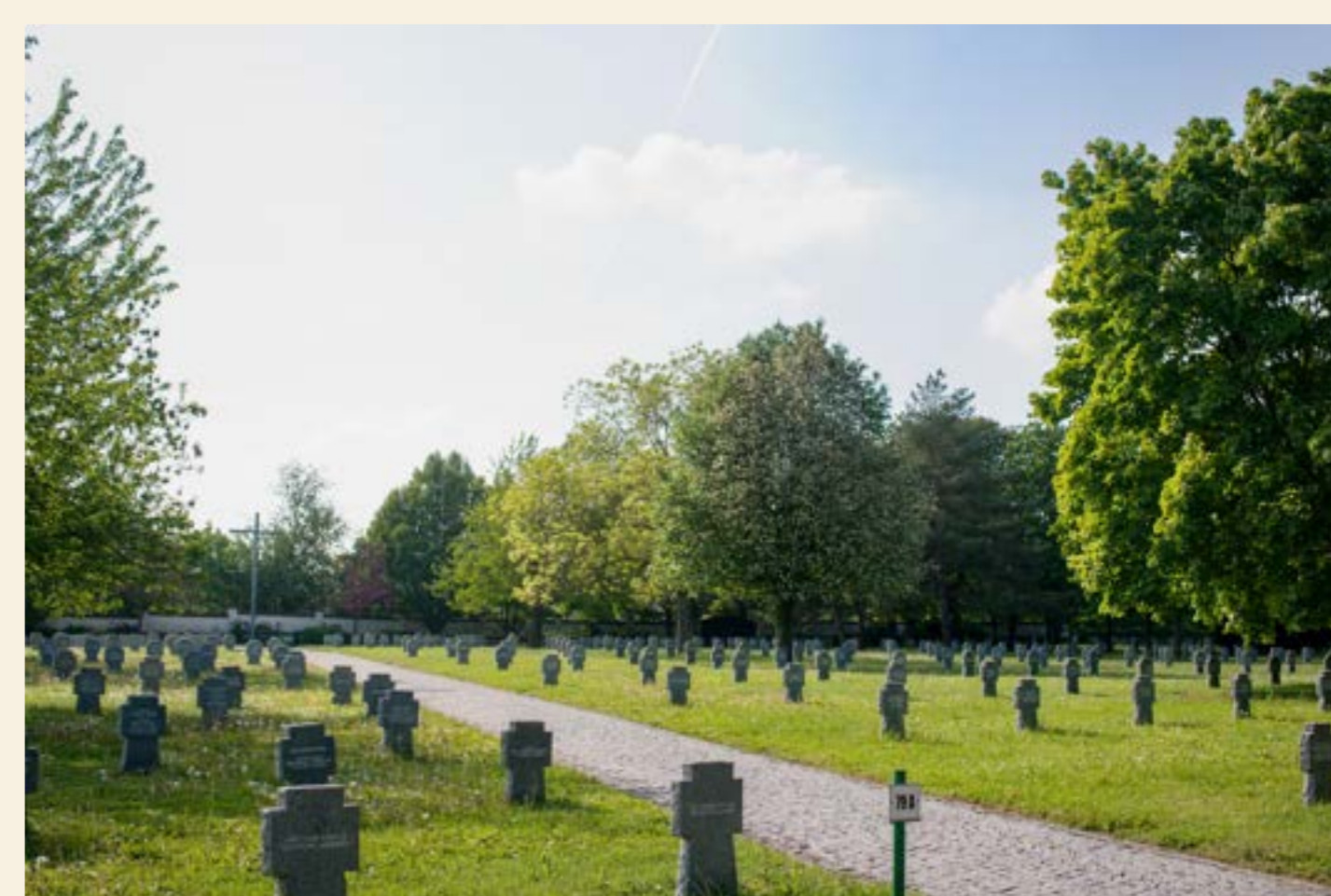
→ **Park Lawns**—larger areas between grave fields or temporary areas designated for future grave sites, less demanding to maintain than parterre lawns, mowed 2–3 times a year.



A new approach to lawn mowing—mosaic mowing (photo: Vilém Jurek)



Example of a lawn register (photo: Vilém Jurek)



Lawn established on grave sites (photo: Vilém Jurek)



Lawns around graves (photo: Vilém Jurek)



Edge of the cemetery (photo: Vilém Jurek)



Scattering meadow (photo: Vilém Jurek)

→ **Meadow Lawns**—can be used on the edges of the cemetery, on larger open areas or in parts where burials no longer take place, a varied mixture of grasses and herbs, significantly supporting biodiversity and the aesthetics of the environment, mowed 1–2 times a year, mosaic mowing is recommended.

→ **Special Lawns**—these are established according to specific conditions (e.g., drought-tolerant lawns on sandy soils, shade mixtures under trees, slopes, scattering meadows), and the mowing and maintenance regime is individual and adapted to the specific location.

Careful Use of Machinery for Lawn Maintenance

When maintaining cemetery lawns, it is important to choose the right type of mower and the correct settings. Unsuitable technology can damage the grass, but also cause noise and dust.

- **Rotary mowers**—suitable for intensive and park lawns, based on sharp blades to cut the grass cleanly and not tear it.
- **Cylinder (reel) mowers**—provide the gentlest and cleanest cut, ideal for representative areas.
- **Bar and drum mowers**—used on edges and larger areas with meadow vegetation, they are gentler on insects and herbs because they cut the grass rather than crushing (mulching) it.
- **Brushcutters / strimmers**—only suitable for cleaning around graves and in inaccessible places.
- **Hand scythes**—gentle on the lawn, quiet so they do not disturb the environment, suitable for meadow lawns.

TIP

Battery-powered mowers and brushcutters can be used for cemetery lawn and greenery maintenance. They are quiet, emission-free, and do not disturb visitors and the reverent atmosphere. Thanks to their lower weight, they are easier to maneuver between graves and do not pose a risk of damaging gravestones. By using them, you protect not only the lawn, but also the overall atmosphere of the cemetery.

How can we ensure perfect and diverse lawns?

→ **Reduce mowing frequency:** Most lawns only need to be mowed 2–3 times a year (flowering meadows 1–2 times). Only the most frequently visited areas (at the entrance, along main paths) should be mowed more often (max. 4 times a year). Longer intervals allow herbs to bloom and seed.

→ **Appropriate timing:** The first mowing of flowery areas should be done at the end of May and beginning of June (after spring flowers have bloomed and seeded), and the second at the end of summer (August/September). Avoid mowing during the hottest weather to prevent unnecessary stress on the vegetation.

Did you know... that mowing on a hot summer day is very stressful for the lawn? That is why it is better to mow in cooler weather or early in the morning.

A few more tips on how to make the lawn even better:

→ **Do not cut the grass too short.** After mowing, leave a height of approx. 9–12 cm (at least 6 cm in representative areas). Taller grass retains moisture better, overheats less, and allows small plants to survive—mowing too low would destroy them.

Not all lawns can be mowed short. Over time, flowering plants appear in taller grass, providing food for insects and an aesthetic effect. (photo: Vilém Jurek)





→ **We do not mow all areas at once.** We always leave about 20–40% of the area unmowed. Unmowed strips provide shelter for insects and small animals and a food source for birds. Taller vegetation also shades the soil and prevents it from drying out. The mosaic of mowed and unmowed areas looks natural and aesthetically pleasing—for example, low-mowed strips along paths alternate with islands of flowering meadows between graves.



*One type of mosaic mowing—
edge mowing
(photo: Vilém Jurek)*

*An unmowed area at the edge
of the path, but the surrounding
area is mowed regularly
(photo: Vilém Jurek)*

→ **After each mowing, we rake and remove the cut grass.** Otherwise, the grass clippings would suffocate the more delicate plants. In addition, removing the cut biomass deprives the soil of nutrients, which benefits the native flowers and reduces weeds.

*Mulched lawns create a thick layer that can often
smell due to decay processes (photo: Vilém Jurek)*

→ **We do not water lawns**—this saves water, increases resistance, and promotes the selection of drier flowering plant species. We also do not fertilize lawns (exuberant growth is not the goal) and do not use herbicides that would destroy useful flowers—we prefer to pull weeds by hand.

→ **In the new concept of cemetery care, we leave areas for scattering ashes as natural as possible.** We mow them only 1–2 times a year (in a mosaic pattern) and otherwise do not interfere with them. They are quiet zones for nature and the bereaved. We do not use herbicides; we remove weeds by hand.




TIP

When establishing a new scattering meadow, we should use shorter grass species. These include red fescue (*Festuca rubra*), sheep's fescue (*Festuca ovina*), Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa supina*), and perennial ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*).

TREES AND SHRUBS

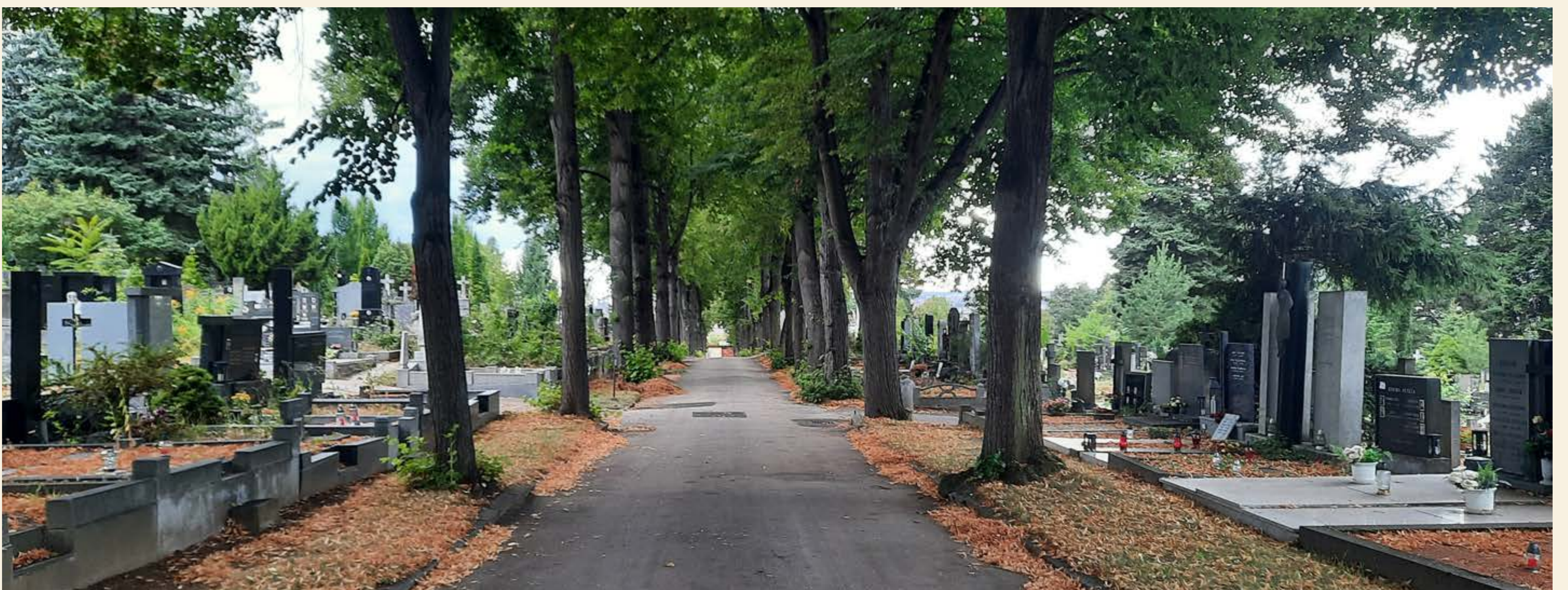
Trees and shrubs form the backbone of cemetery greenery, giving the place character, shade, and a reverent atmosphere, while also providing a habitat for many organisms. When caring for them, it is necessary to ensure the safety of visitors and the long-term health of the trees. Many cemetery trees are very old and require individual attention.

The most valuable trees in cemeteries often grow in rows and avenues, which create a striking spatial effect. However, these plantings are difficult to restore—it is not possible to achieve the same impression by gradually replacing individual trees.



Tree lines are often subject to numerous interventions: roads are built in their root zones, utility networks are laid, digging is carried out, tree crowns are pruned to make space for lighting, and burials continue to take place in their immediate vicinity (the most sought-after locations are those near roads).

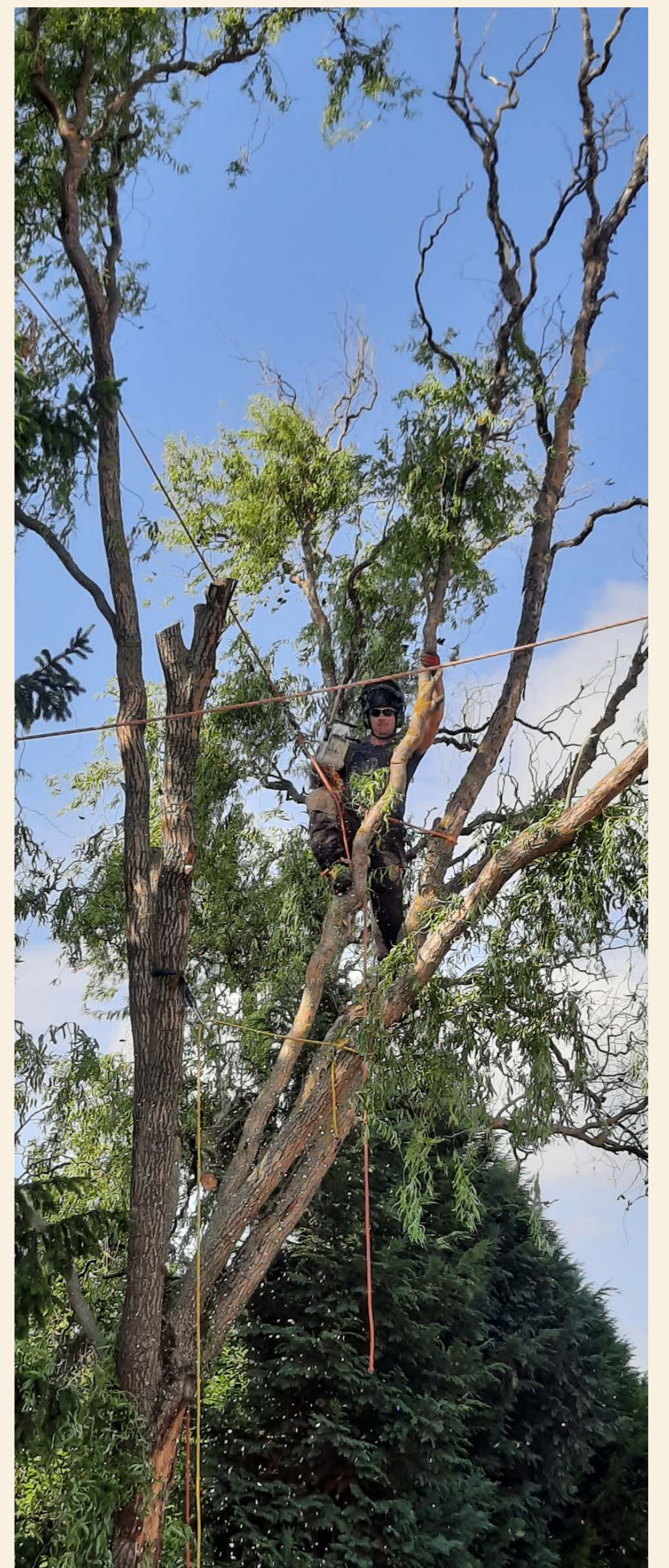
Protecting these trees therefore requires a fundamental change in approach—respecting the protective root zone, limiting digging, and, in extreme cases, even removing graves in the immediate vicinity. Without such measures, there is a risk of rapid loss of the trees.



Avenue of Linden trees as part of the cemetery (photo: Vilém Jurek)

We provide individual and sensitive care through:

- **Regular tree inspections:** every year (at least once a year), we have our trees inspected by an arborist. They assess their health and stability and recommend necessary interventions (removal of dry branches, pruning, etc.). Timely care prevents branches or entire trees from falling.
- **Pruning instead of felling:** unless a tree poses an immediate danger, we prefer to treat it professionally rather than fell it. We remove diseased and hazardous branches and, if necessary, improve conditions at the roots. This prolongs the life of the tree while maintaining safety.
- **Preserving old trees:** we do not unnecessarily remove old trees with hollows, as they are of great value to nature. We do not clean or fill cavities, leaving them as natural shelters for birds, bats, and insects. We intervene in old trees only minimally, performing only necessary safety cuts.



*Arborist intervention on a tree
(photo: Vilém Jurek)*



*Shrubs can be part of slopes or spaces behind individual graves
(photo: Vilém Jurek)*

- **Caring for dying trees:** We try to prolong the life of very old trees as much as possible. We gradually thin out the crown in several stages to reduce the risk of decay. If conditions allow, we also leave a few strong dry branches as habitats for birds and insects. Instead of one radical cut, we make several smaller cuts – the tree recovers better from these. This allows the old "memorial tree" to stand safely for many more years as a valuable biotope.

- **Replacement plantings:** When planning for cemeteries (e.g., horticultural studies, cemetery development, inventory) we try to designate new areas for replacement plantings. These can be peripheral areas (in the form of solitary trees) or sites of removed graves. We plant new trees in advance, before the old ones die.

TIP

In addition to trees, shrubs are also an important part of cemetery greenery—hedges around the grounds or ornamental shrubs on and between graves. We care for shrubs in a natural way so that they too are healthy, bloom abundantly, and provide shelter for nesting birds.



Well-maintained shrubs in several rows can be an alternative to living walls made of overrated conifers (photo: Vilém Jurek)

To keep bushes healthy, we need to ensure:

→ **Regular but gentle pruning:** we keep shrubs at a reasonable size by pruning them regularly, but we never rejuvenate them drastically all at once. Ideally, we keep them at a height of around 2–3 m (as needed) so that they do not grow too tall. We do not remove more than 30% of the volume or height in one pruning session so that the plant has enough leaves for further growth.

→ **Pruning outside the nesting season:** plan major pruning and felling of shrubs outside the bird nesting season. The best time is late winter (February to mid-March), when birds are not yet nesting and the shrubs are leafless. Do not prune shrubs from around mid-March to the end of May so as not to disturb nesting birds.

→ **Consider the weather:** in hot summer (at temperatures above 26 °C), avoid radical pruning. Dry and hot weather increases stress on plants and wounds heal slower. It is better to wait for cooler weather (e.g., in autumn).

→ **Proper tools:** use sharp hand tools (shears, hedge trimmers) for clean cuts. Avoid using chainsaws and brushcutters when shaping shrubs. Cut thicker branches correctly at the branch collar so that the wound heals well and no stump remains. Do not cover the cuts with anything.

Did you know... that carefully maintained shrubs remain dense, healthy, and bloom abundantly? They also provide shelter for birds and create an aesthetic division of space, which promotes a reverent atmosphere. By combining different types of shrubs (evergreen and deciduous, flowering at different times of the year), we can ensure that the cemetery greenery looks neat and natural all year round.

INVASIVE SPECIES

Invasive plants (non-native species that spread uncontrollably at the expense of native species) can also appear in cemeteries. We combat them by trying to prevent their introduction (e.g., we do not bring contaminated soil to the cemetery, we check new seedlings, and we warn visitors not to plant non-native species) and we consistently remove existing invasions or at least limit and isolate them if complete eradication is not possible. This is a long-term effort that is part of the management plan. Education is also important—we explain to the public why we remove invasive plants and prefer to plant native species.

TIP

If you are caring for a family grave, choose native plant species rather than exotic ones. For example, instead of exotic thujas, plant a native shrub or perennial – it will fit better into the environment, will not threaten the surrounding nature, and is usually less demanding to maintain.

PLANNING AND COMMUNICATION

The nature-friendly transformation of a cemetery must be thoroughly planned and communicated to the public on an ongoing basis. Every cemetery has different conditions (soil, climate), and local residents may perceive the changes differently.

How to plan systematically and transparently?

→ **Planning ahead:** A long-term maintenance plan (at least one year in advance) is developed. The plan includes regular activities (mowing, pruning) as well as larger interventions (felling dangerous trees, establishing new areas). We will schedule the work outside the main visiting seasons. We will notify the public in advance of any major changes (e.g., planting trees or converting lawns to meadows) in an appropriate manner—we will let people know in advance on bulletin boards, in the municipal newsletter, or on the website. Transparency will help prevent misunderstanding and resistance to new developments.

Examples of invasive species:

Invasive flowers



Canadian fleabane
Conyza canadensis



Canadian goldenrod/giant goldenrod
Solidago canadensis/S. gigantea



knotweed
Reynoutria sp.



lance-leaved aster
Symphotrichum lanceolatum



common milkweed
Asclepias syriaca

Invasive woody plants



box elder
Acer negundo



holly-leaved Mahonia
Mahonia aquifolium



tree of heaven
Ailanthus altissima



Virginia creeper
Parthenocissus quinquefolia



black locust
Robinia pseudoacacia

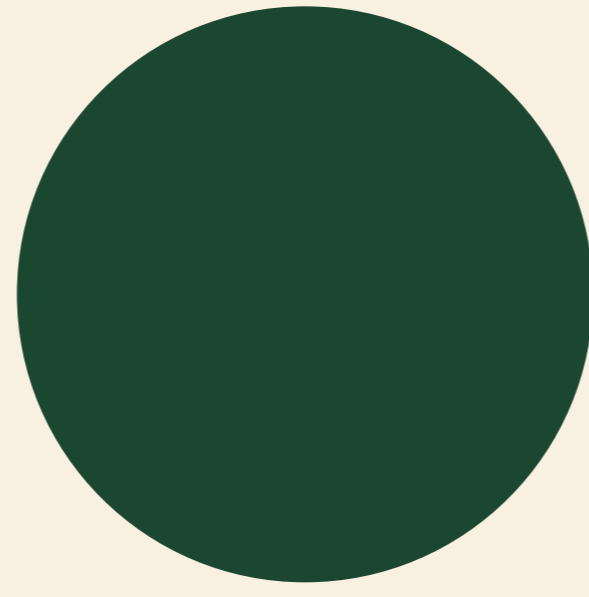
→ **We respect deadlines:** When planning, we take important days and events into account. During All Souls' Day or Easter, when many people visit the cemetery, the grounds must be tidy and no noisy work may be carried out. We also stop all noisy activities during funeral ceremonies. We include these important dates in the plan and inform all employees of them.

→ **Cooperation with the public:** Each community may have a different opinion on the appearance of the cemetery. We therefore identify the wishes and concerns of local people and adjust our plans accordingly. At the same time, we clearly explain the purpose of our measures to the public (e.g., less frequent mowing = more flowers and insects, piles of branches = shelter for hedgehogs) so that they understand and accept the changes.

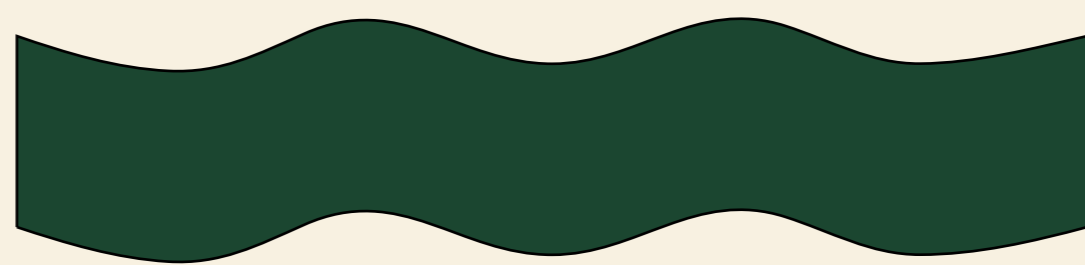
→ **Heritage-protected cemeteries:** In the case of historic cemeteries, we consult all interventions with heritage conservation specialists and respect the original appearance. Even such a cemetery can be sensitively "greened"—for example by planting native shrubs under old trees or creating a meadow on unused lawns—always in agreement with heritage conservationists and with respect for the historical value of the site. New natural elements must fit in with the historical character of the cemetery.



Information board about mosaic mowing (photo: Vilém Jurek)



**ALL OF THE ASPECTS MENTIONED—
FROM PLANNING THE WORK TO
COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE
TO MAINTENANCE DETAILS—ARE
INTERRELATED AND FORM A SINGLE
WHOLE. WE VIEW THE CEMETERY
AS A LIVING ORGANISM WHERE THE
WORLD OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD,
CULTURE AND NATURE, MEET. CARING
FOR IT MEANS RESPECTING THIS MULTI-
LAYERED NATURE. THIS FULFILLS
THE IDEA OF A SO-CALLED REVERENT
BIOCENTER—A SPACE THAT SERVES
BOTH REVERENCE AND BIOLOGICAL
DIVERSITY AT THE SAME TIME. SUCH
A CEMETERY NOT ONLY PRESERVES
MEMORIES, BUT ALSO BRINGS HOPE
FOR THE FUTURE BY CONTRIBUTING
TO NATURE CONSERVATION AND
IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE
SURROUNDING AREA.**





**SUSTAINABLE
CEMETERY—
ARCHITECTURE,
LEGISLATION, AND
ECOLOGY**

Blanka Solár

Built elements and cemetery architecture have a direct impact not only on the overall sustainability and biodiversity of a cemetery, but also on the experience and comfort of visitors during their time at the site. This chapter summarizes a possible approach to these aspects, ensuring that the cemetery's commemorative and ecological functions are balanced and aligned with respect for both nature and people.

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF GRAVESTONE DESIGN IN CZECHIA AND SLOVAKIA

In particular, the widespread practice of covering graves with granite or concrete slabs is actually a relatively recent development, a consequence of societal developments and changing perceptions in the second half of the 20th century—the communist era.

It is important to consider how we approach the issue of gravestones as they influence the sustainability and biodiversity of a cemetery.

Until the beginning of industrialisation at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, cemeteries in our region were strongly integrated with the landscape. Burials took place **close to nature**, often in rural cemeteries without a clear separation from their surroundings. Gravestones were **locally sourced in terms of materials**—more or less worked stone, wood, clay, or metal—and had a varied character.

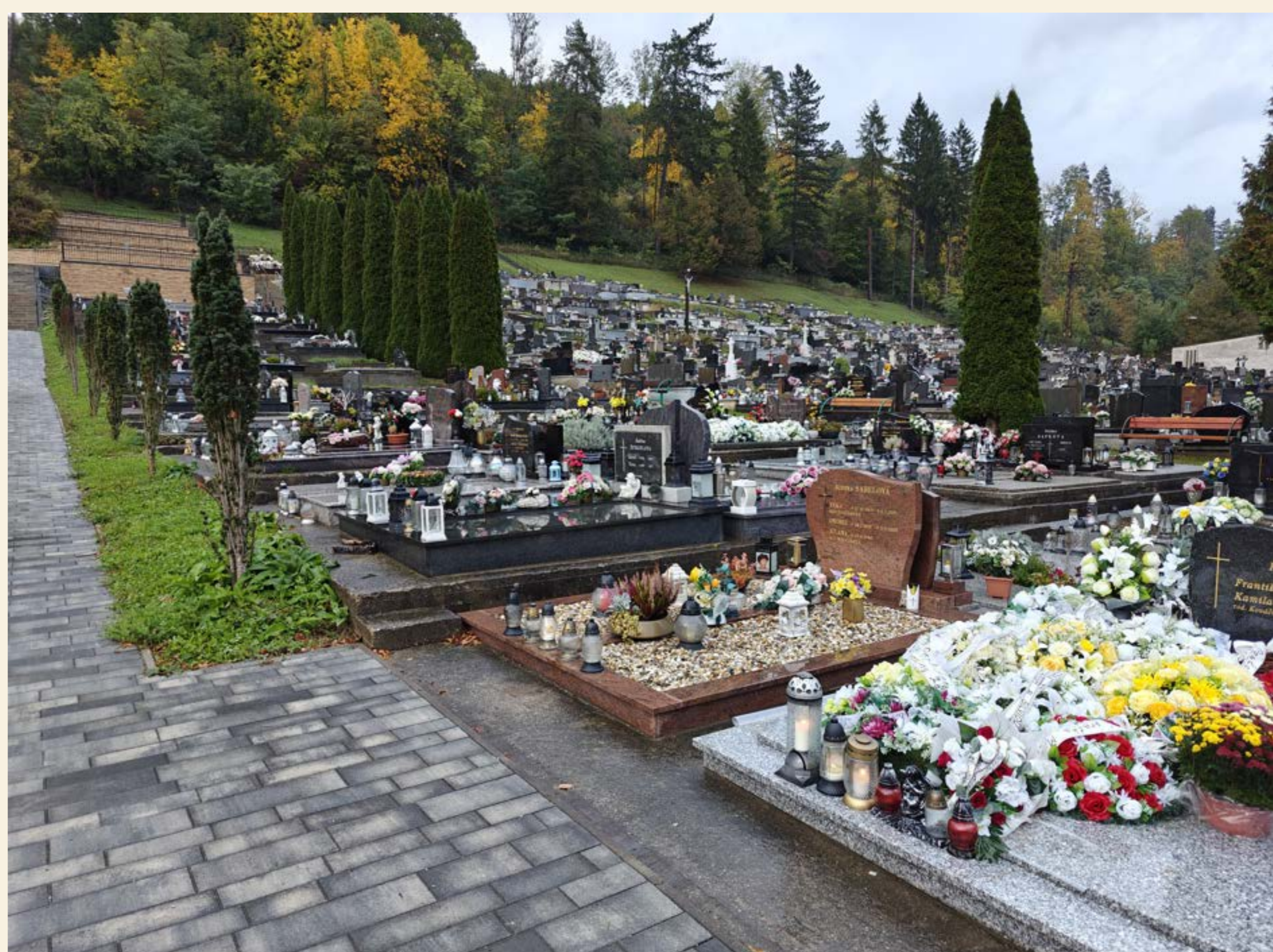
Cemeteries were often connected to **forest edges, Ways of the Cross or sacred trees**—they were an integral part of the landscape and settlements.

With the advent of the industrial revolution, the migration of the population from the countryside to the cities and the resulting increase in population density, cemeteries underwent changes as well. However, the approach to gravestones changed more significantly with the mentioned change of political regime.

Did you know... that just a few decades ago, the aesthetics and architectural-urbanistic concept of cemeteries in Czechia and Slovakia was in many ways much more similar to natural cemeteries, such as those in Scandinavia?

What factors gave rise to the need to "establish" a gravesite with a large slab?

- **Maintenance:** From the 1960s to the 1980s, emphasis was placed on "order and cleanliness" in socialist countries—a bare, grassy grave was perceived as unkempt. Covering the grave with a slab meant less weeds, less mowing, and less maintenance.
- **Prestige:** Granite or concrete headstones became a symbol of dignity and prestige—a kind of "showcase" for the family.
- **Self-expression:** In a society where opportunities for individual expression were limited, graves became a place where it was possible to express one's relationship to the deceased, often through the grandeur of the gravesite.
- **Non-ecology:** There was no ecological or landscape approach to funeral culture—cemeteries were standardized and managed according to technical service operating standards.
- **Economic Perspective:** Stone and concrete companies supported this model, since larger gravestones meant more orders and more profit.

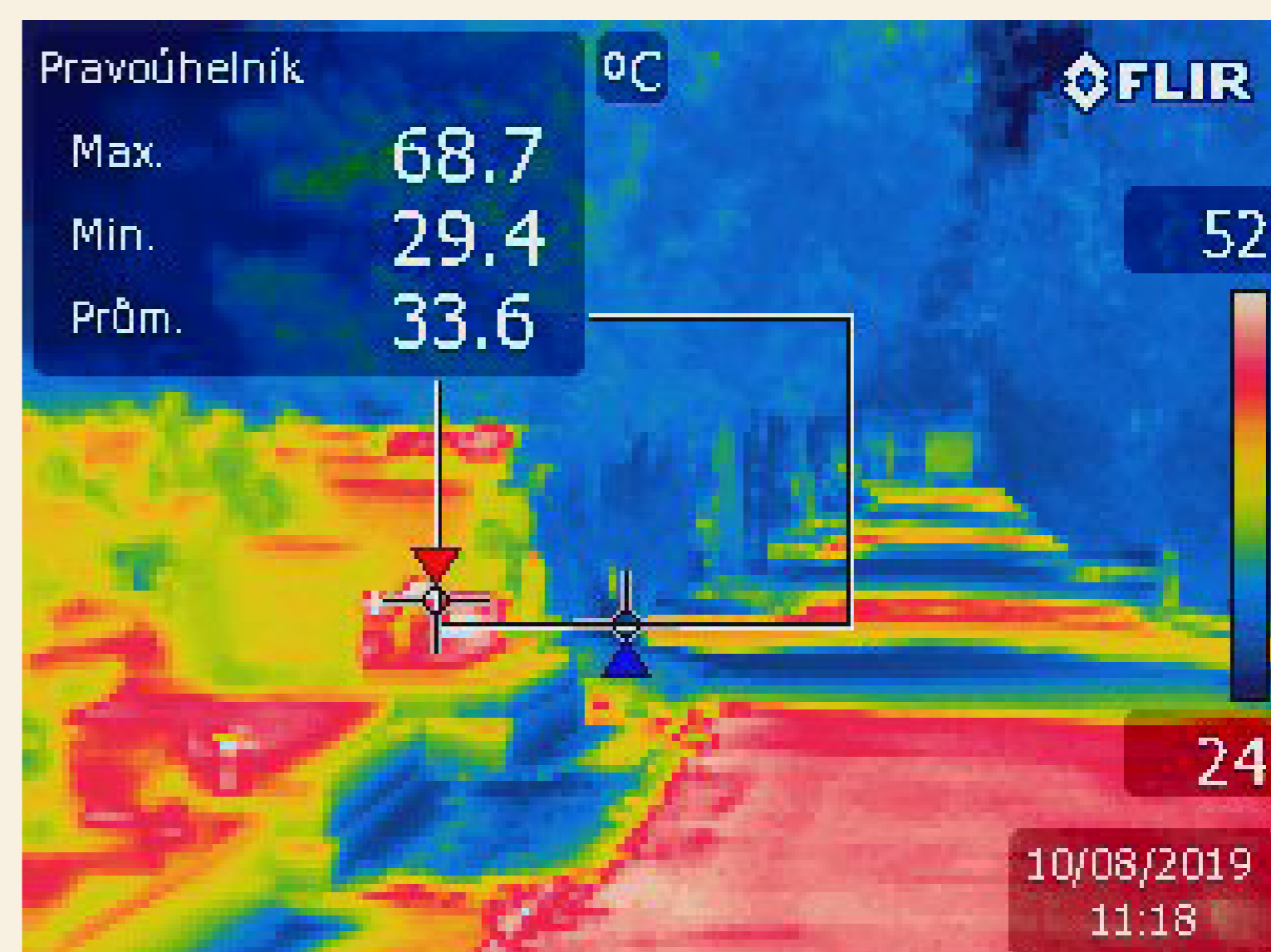


Cemetery in Teplička nad Váhom, densely packed with gravestones (photo: Jana Solárová)



Skogskyrkogården Cemetery is characterized by its keeping with the character of the landscape (photo: Melissa Thereliz, openverse.org, licence CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Thermal imaging camera photo shows significant heat accumulation in stone elements (photo: Funebra)



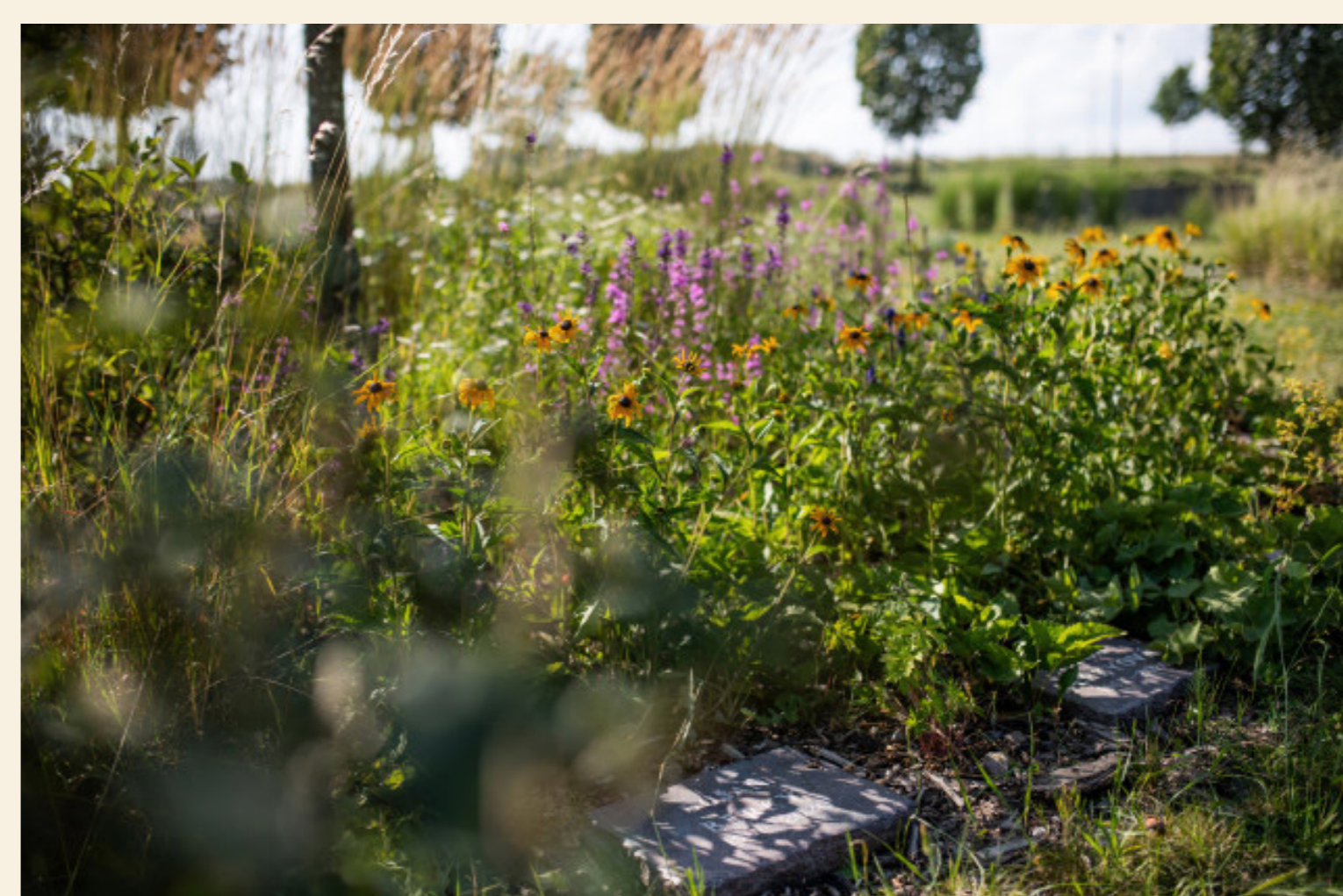
Today's Negative Consequences:

- **Lack of water absorption;** extensive paving prevents rainwater absorption.
- **Increased overheating of the environment;** stone surfaces accumulate and re-emit heat.
- **Local reduction in biodiversity;** no flowers, insects, birds.
- **High maintenance and remediation costs;** especially for older graves with sunken slabs.
- **The ecological footprint of stone imports;** today, gravestone material is commonly imported from Asia.

TIP

A comparison with Scandinavia reveals a cultural difference: Scandinavian concepts of memorial sites are more closely linked to nature, often without dominant gravestones, with grass, trees, flowers, and extensive water-retentive areas.

Záhrada spomienok in Zvolen is a great example of a modern landscape cemetery (photo: Funebra)



GRAVESTONES IN RELATION TO BIODIVERSITY AND ECOLOGY

In order to preserve the sustainable and biodiverse character of a cemetery, it is advisable to use smaller gravestones made of local stone, unpolished, with a surface that allows microhabitats to grow, or use wooden or ceramic plaques instead of stone.



Lizards and other reptiles like to use the gaps between rocks as hiding places (photo: Tyom, openverse.com, Licence CC BY-NC-SA 2. 0.)

Did you know... that biopatina can create natural “art” on gravestones? Organisms find it difficult to attach themselves to polished stone.

Eroded gravestone with biopatina, which with a little imagination creates a picture of natural scenery, Highgate Cemetery, London (photo: Blanka Solár)

Did you know... that gravestones made from pieces of unworked stone can also serve as a shelter for reptiles?

These elements of memorialization have secondary ecological functions:

- **Structures with gaps and porosity**—creation of microhabitats, biopatin, shelter for animals.
- **Natural degradation**—restoration of nutrients to the soil.
- **Minimal maintenance**—support for natural succession.
- **Simplification of grave preparation before burial**—no need for difficult handling of heavy slabs.





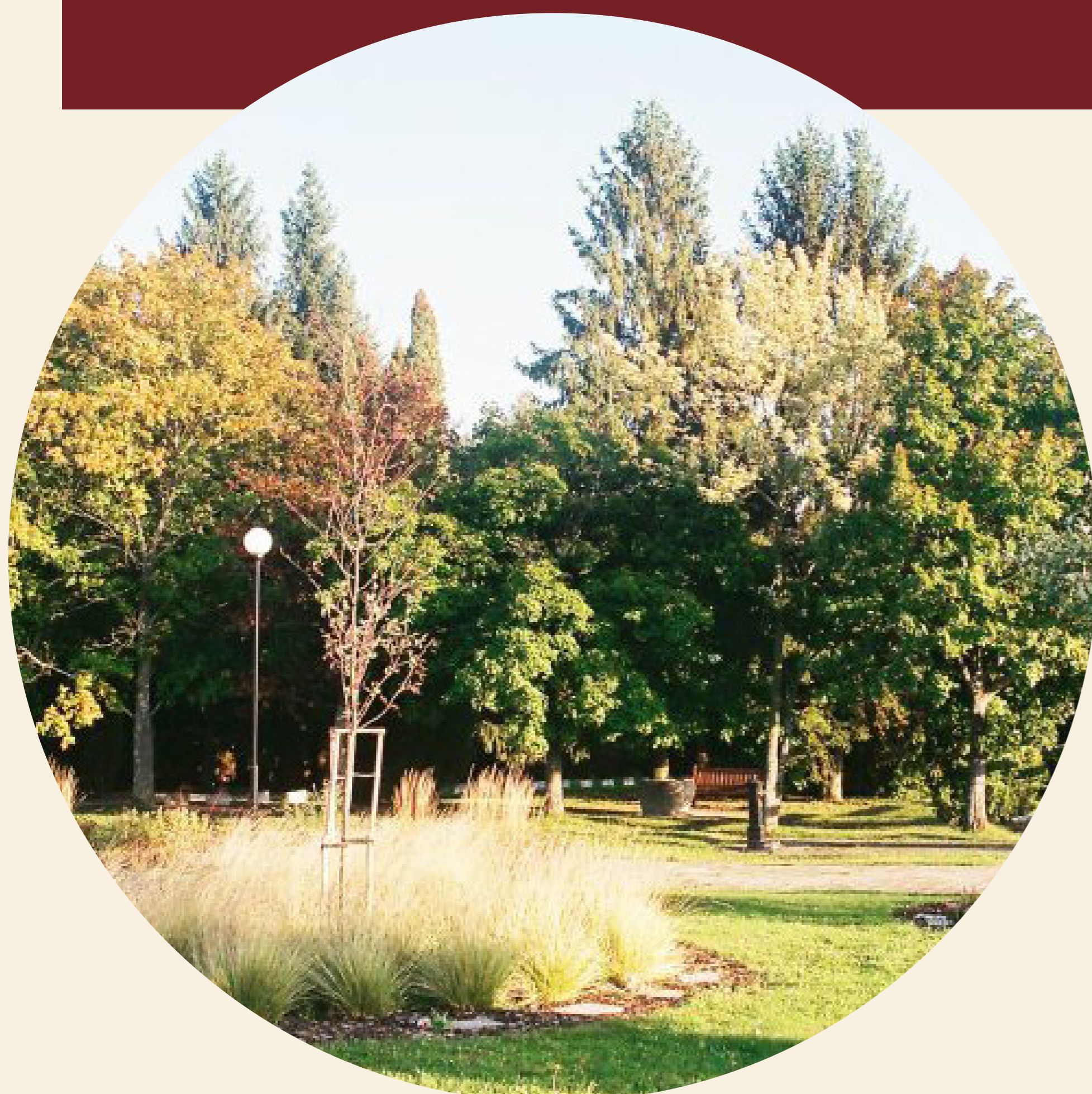
*Ohlsdorf, Max Herz Family grave, Hamburg
(photo: Vitavia, licence CC BY-SA 4.0)*

*Ohlsdorf, Perennial flower beds on graves
(photo: Try and error's photo, openverse.org,
licence CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)*



TIP

For existing graves, it is possible to remove the horizontal cover slabs and replace them with, for example, perennial planting. An example of such a solution is the design of graves at the Ohlsdorf Park Cemetery in Hamburg.



*Skogskyrkogården, Stockholm
(photo: Guillian perez, licence CC BY 2.0)*

*Garden of Remembrance,
Zvolen (photo: Funebra)*



LEGISLATION AND AWARENESS REGARDING GRAVESTONES

Legal Framework Regarding the Regulation of New and Existing Gravestones

Act No. 256/2001 Coll. on funeral services sets out the basic rules for the establishment and operation of cemeteries. Importantly, it does not address the form of gravestones in any detail—this is left to the **regulations of public cemeteries**, which are set by cemetery operators (usually municipalities).

TIP

The cemetery may manage the conditions for new graves, including the shape, size, and material of gravestones, within the framework of its **Public Cemetery Regulations** (approved by the municipal council).

What is the procedure for new grave sites?

The management may **prohibit horizontal parts of gravestones** (i.e., slabs larger than a certain size, known as "cover slabs") in the **cemetery regulations** or its appendix (e.g., "Manual for the Appearance of Gravestones") for reasons such as:

- Adaptation to climate change (water absorption capacity),
- Improved maintenance,
- Support for biodiversity.

Inspiration; The legislative provision may include, for example, the following points:



Article X—Special provisions for Section E—Environmental Section

Character of the Section

Section E is intended for environmentally and landscape-sensitive burials with an emphasis on sustainable rainwater management, support for biodiversity, and the careful use of material resources. The aim is to create a natural environment that reflects a dignified and environmentally responsible approach to the reverent space.

Materials and Treatment

a) Only natural and recyclable materials are permitted (e.g., local stone, recycled stone, wood, Corten steel, etc.).

b) Smooth polished surfaces are not recommended; a natural patina is preferred.

c) The use of plastic decorations, ornaments, and coatings containing synthetic polymers is prohibited.

Rainwater and Soil Management

a) All gravesites must be permeable to water; any reinforcement of the base (concrete foundation slabs) is prohibited.

b) The cemetery management shall ensure the absorption of rainwater into the soil through gravel paths between the graves.

Shape and Size of Gravestones

a) Only vertical gravestones (e.g., steles, monuments, or memorial plaques) set directly into the ground are permitted in this section.

b) Horizontal covering of the grave site (e.g., cover slabs, kerbs, lying grave covers) is not permitted (alternatively, it may be permitted instead of a vertical stele, but with a size limit, e.g., 40×40cm).

c) Gravestones must not exceed the footprint of the grave site and their maximum height must not exceed 100 cm.

Vegetation and Maintenance

a) At least 80% of gravesites must remain covered with grass or suitable vegetation (e.g., drought-tolerant perennials, sedums, ground cover plants).

b) The use of chemical sprays and artificial coverings (e.g., mulch fabric, artificial turf) is prohibited.

c) Live flowers, moss, and stone elements with secondary biodiversity functions (e.g., insect shelters) are permitted.

Elements for Biodiversity

a) Approved biodiversity structures (e.g., birdhouses, insect hotels, natural walls) may be installed in this section.

b) The management supports the adoption of gravesites as ecological micro-gardens that contribute to the restoration of the local ecosystem.

Transitional Provision

These rules apply exclusively to gravesites established in Section E after the effective date of this decree. They do not apply retroactively to lease agreements already concluded in other parts of the cemetery.

Suitable Accompanying Attachments:

"Ecological grave manual" with illustrations, permitted plants, recommended gravestones.

Samples of gravestones made from recycled stone, contact details for stonemasons who can produce them.



Forest Cemetery in Hradec Králové (photo: Adam Vokáč)



**Did you know...
that the Forest
Cemetery in Hradec
Králové is an example
of a cemetery in
Czechia that has had
similar regulations in
place for a long time?
Here, we can see how,
over time, natural
gravestones contribute
to biodiversity and
create a unique
atmosphere.**

Legislative Problems and Possible Solutions— Existing Gravesites:

Tenants' rights: Problems may arise in certain areas when encouraging families to reduce the size of gravestones. It is always important to **strictly respect the legal framework**—the rights of gravesite tenants, which are contractually guaranteed. However, the same applies to gravesite owners, who should respect the decree; if, for example, the original contract stipulates that **the latest cemetery administration decree** must be respected in terms of possible modifications to grave sites, then compliance with the decree can be enforced on the owners if it can be proven that unauthorized modifications to the grave site took place after the date on which the decree came into force. However, **respectful communication** and **gentle environmental education** are always important. **Especially in historic cemeteries, heritage protection** may come into play. The regime of Act No. 20/1987 Coll. on heritage care applies. Coordination with the National Heritage Institute is necessary, and it is not possible to arbitrarily change the appearance of graves. From the point of view of public perception, it is necessary to take into account that the reduction of parts of gravestones

may be perceived as disrespect for tradition or reverence. The solution is sensitive implementation and education within existing cemetery zones, with an emphasis on **explaining the benefits** in relation to **water management, greenery, biodiversity, and ecology.**



Summary:

- It is not possible to retroactively order the modification or removal of an already standing gravestone without violating the rights of the grave site owner (lessee).
- The law protects the lessee's right to use the grave site as long as they comply with the lease agreement.
- One possible approach is to **motivate** users to voluntarily reduce the size of their gravestones through an **information campaign.**
- **When renewing a lease agreement/concluding a new agreement for an existing grave site,** it may be newly defined that the grave must be adapted to the current rules in order to be extended—however, **this must be clearly defined in the original agreement at the time of renewal** (it cannot be done unilaterally, but it can be done by agreement of both parties).

How to get started?

- **Revision of public cemetery regulations:** introduction of environmentally friendly rules for new gravesites; Option to divide the cemetery into ‘traditional’ and ‘environmentally friendly’ sections with corresponding conditions.
- **Preparation of a manual for sustainable graves and sample graves:** sample examples of vertical gravestones without horizontal slabs; sample examples of horizontal elements, dimensional limits; Permitted materials, proposals for biodiversity elements (perennials, etc.).
- **Creation of an educational campaign:** Flyers, information boards, collaboration with the media; Emphasis on a respectful approach and the benefits: lower costs, sustainability, aesthetics.
- **Pilot project:** creation of a model ecological section at the existing cemetery; Involvement of a landscape architect and the public.

TIP

In complicated situations involving conflicts between gravestones and trees that overlap with heritage protection, it is advisable to convene a meeting of experienced arborists and heritage conservationists and propose appropriate measures directly on site.



This is what a collision between gravestones and trees can look like; Arlington Cemetery, Virginia, USA (photo: Alex Avriette, openverse.org, Licence CC BY-NC 2.0)

Collision of Trees and Gravestones

Our law does not specify the minimum distance between trees and gravestones, but in practice it is recommended that trees be planted at least 3 metres away from graves. This distance allows sufficient space for the root system to grow and minimises the risk of damage to gravestones or the grave structure. Historically, however, this has not always been adhered to, or the problem arose over time as a result of vegetation growth. This often occurs in historic cemeteries that are subject to heritage protection.

Did you know...

that Arlington Cemetery in Virginia, USA, faces this problem as a large cemetery with more than 9,000 trees? Preserving trees as a priority, strategic planting planning, introducing arboricultural standards, using root protection technology, and regular monitoring and maintenance have proven successful here.

RE-USE AND RECYCLING OF MATERIALS

Second-hand Gravestones

Parts of dismantled or removed gravestones can be reused for newly erected gravestones. Another option is to have the stones **ground down**; for smaller elements, this may be **more economical** than purchasing a completely new gravestone, while also promoting the use of **local materials**. Waste stone can also be used in other ways within the cemetery, for example to **create site furniture and other elements for public spaces**.



*Sculptural approach of a ceremonial site in the Forest of Memories, Prague-Ďáblice
(photo: Hřbitovy Praha, www.hrbitovy.cz)*

Other Elements Supporting Biodiversity:

Spiritual and symbolic elements with artistic value, such as sculptural water features made of stone or Corten steel for soy candles floating on water, have a **psychological and memorial function** as well as serving as a **bird bath**, thereby **supporting biodiversity**.



*Corten bowl for floating soy candles,
Plzeň Cemetery
(photo: Martin Pecuch, Plzeň.eu)*

TIP

Waste wood from cuttings can be used as site furniture—natural seating and an insect hotel in one.

Natural log seats in the Forest of Memories (photo: Adam Vokáč)



TIP

One option for using waste wood and brushwood is to create information boards with integrated insect hotels, which will delight not only insects but also young visitors to the cemetery.

Information board with integrated insect hotel in the Garden of Memories, Zvolen (photo: Funebra)



WATER MANAGEMENT, RESOURCE CONSERVATION

Blue-green Infrastructure in Cemeteries

What is blue-green infrastructure (BGI)?

It is a set of nature-based solutions that integrate **water (blue)** and **vegetation (green)** elements into urban environments with the aim of improving quality of life, slowing down rainwater runoff, retaining it in a place, and promoting biodiversity. In cemeteries—as specific, extensive public spaces—BGI is especially significant. Cemeteries often contain a large proportion of paved impermeable surfaces and at the same time have the potential to become a reservoir of greenery, water and life in the middle of a city or town.

Comparison of Permeable and Impermeable Surfaces and Their Impact on Biodiversity

Hard, impermeable surfaces such as asphalt limit water infiltration, increase runoff, and reduce moisture availability for plants. Also, areas of water accumulation can form, which evaporate without benefit and do not remain in the soil available for vegetation.

Permeable surfaces (gravel, vegetation paving), on the other hand, promote hydrological balance.

Benefits of Applying Blue-green Infrastructure Principles in Cemeteries

- Increased aesthetic and cultural value of the site.
- Water retention and efficient use, reduced erosion and dust.
- Promotion of biodiversity in cities.
- Mitigation of climate change (cooling of the area, improvement of the microclimate).
- Improved public perception of the site—a "living" cemetery as a place of renewal, not just death.

- **Infiltration areas** allow water to seep naturally into the soil.
- **The varied structure** (pavements, flower beds, mulch) creates different microclimatic zones and habitats for insects and animals.
- **Minimizing paved areas** reduces overheating.
- **Measures taken on the roofs of existing structures with extensive green cover increase water retention and improve the microclimate.**
- **Moist soil** promotes the occurrence of insects, amphibians, and microorganisms.
- **Slowing down runoff** increases the natural retention capacity of the area and reduces erosion effects, preventing soil drying.



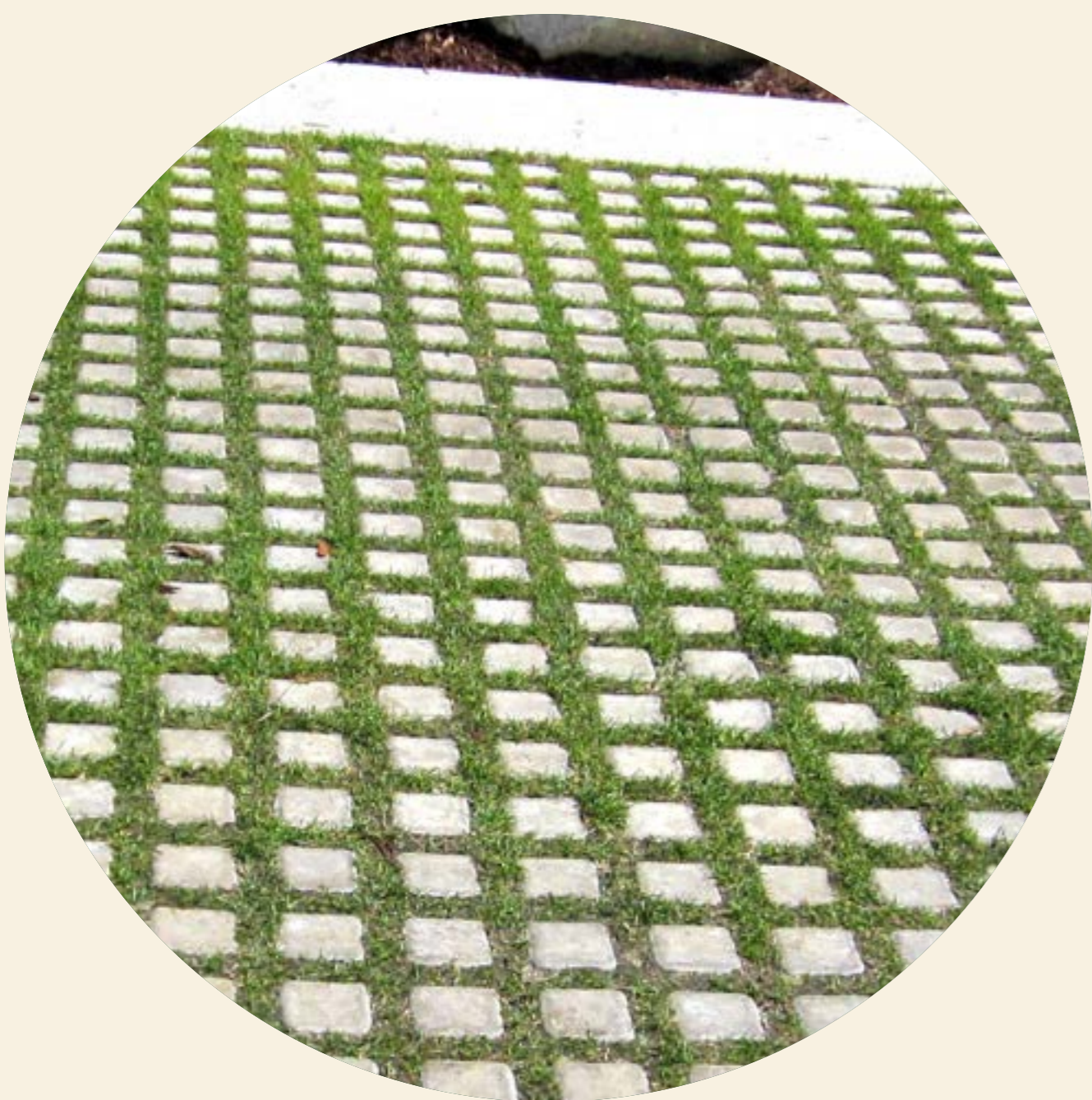
Example of water runoff on an impermeable surface (photo: Kelly Ishmael, openverse.com, Licence CCO 1. 0)

Example of a permeable walkable surface (photo: Artur Pawlak, Pixabay.com)



Permeable Surfaces in Cemeteries:

In cemetery environments, you can use paths made from a mixture of gravel and clay, gravel beds, grass pavers, stone mosaics on a gravel base, or permeable concrete tiles with vegetation joints. These materials allow rainwater to seep directly into the soil, reducing runoff, improving the microclimate, and contributing to better care of the surrounding vegetation. They also complement the natural and reverent character of the cemetery environment.



Concrete retention grass pavement (photo: ECV-OnTheRoad, openverse.org, licence CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Historical stone mosaic is a traditional solution that is still in line with the principles of blue-green infrastructure (photo: HenFre, Pixabay.com)



Permeable gravel surfaces (photo: Alabama Extension, openverse.org, licence CCO 1. 0.)

Overview of Suitable Materials and Specific Uses:

Crushed Stone Surfaces

(naturally stabilized gravel–sand mix)



Natural appearance, suitability for reverent environments, good water permeability, and low acquisition costs



Higher maintenance requirements (track formation, surface softening during heavy rainfall) and unsuitability for use on sloping terrain

Permeable Concrete and Permeable Asphalt



High load–bearing capacity and durability, and very good water absorption thanks to the porous structure. Thanks to its high resistance, it is suitable for use on main roads and access areas.



higher acquisition costs than conventional concrete/asphalt, the need for professional installation and regular cleaning of the pores.

Gravel Surfaces

(loose stone)



Low cost, easy availability, and easy combination with vegetation



Poorer accessibility for people with limited mobility and possible weed growth—maintenance required

Stone Mosaic on a Gravel Bed



Aesthetic value, historical character, and a combination of permeability and strength. Possibility of using second–hand paving stones



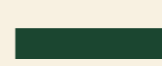
Higher labor intensity during installation, necessary regular maintenance of joints, and possible weed growth.

Grass Paving

(plastic grid, concrete retention paving, or gravel lawns)



Permeability and the possibility of grassing, the surface is well–suited for vehicle traffic, and aesthetically pleasing variants are available



Need for regular care of the growing greenery and the lifespan of plastic variants, which can degrade due to UV radiation.

Retention Reservoirs—Rainwater Retention and Utilization.

Retention reservoirs are an effective and, in their above-ground form, potentially simple solution for improving rainwater management in cemeteries. More complex underground systems require project preparation, professional implementation, and have higher investment costs.



*Retention reservoir in Zlaté Moravce
(photo: CEEV Živica archives)*

**Did you know...
that simple above-ground retention tanks are not difficult to implement, yet can significantly improve water management in cemeteries?**



*Retention reservoir in Sešovce
(photo: CEEV Živica archives)*

How does it work?

→ **Collecting rainwater from the roof:**

Rainwater falls on the roof of the building (e.g., columbarium, morgue, chapel). Gutters collect the water and drain it down through downspouts (vertical pipes).

→ **Connecting the downspout to the retention tank:**

the downspout is connected to an underground or above-ground retention tank, which serves as a water reservoir; it can be made of plastic, concrete, or recycled material; the tank should have an overflow system—when it is full, excess water is drained into an infiltration system (e.g., gravel bed or rain garden).

→ **Use of retained water:** water from the reservoir can be used to irrigate vegetation in the cemetery (e.g., manually or by drip irrigation); in case of drought, it ensures the maintenance of greenery without the need to use drinking water; it contributes to reducing heat islands and maintaining a favorable microclimate.

→ **Protection against sewer overload:** during heavy rains, the tank temporarily retains a large volume of water, thereby relieving the public sewer system; it reduces the risk of local flooding, waterlogging, or erosion.

→ **System maintenance:** the tank is equipped with a filter basket for debris (leaves, moss from the roof); it is regularly inspected and cleaned to prevent clogging of the drain or overflow.

Green Roofs on Cemetery Buildings and Columbariums

Green roofs on cemetery buildings significantly contribute to sustainable rainwater management and improve the microclimate of the cemetery. They function as a natural retention element, reduce overheating of structures, and increase the overall biodiversity of the area.

TIP

Extensive green roofs are also suitable for smaller functional structures, such as roofs over containers. Consult with a specialist on green roofs about the possibilities for your cemetery.

There are two basic types:

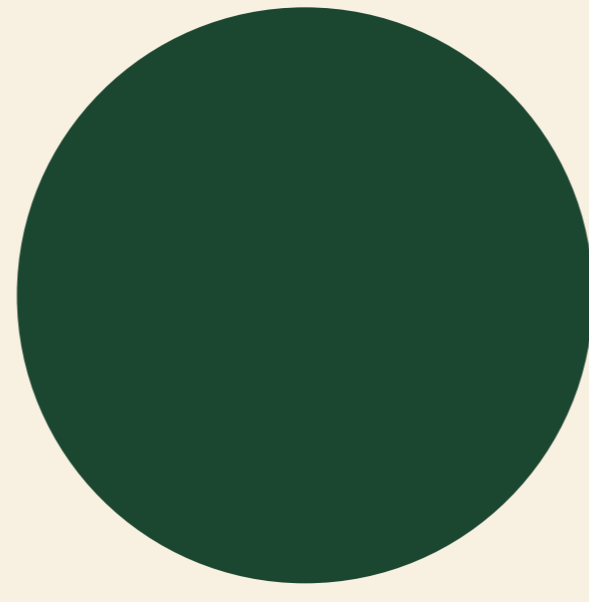
→ Extensive green roofs are planted with drought-tolerant plants such as sedums and stonecrops. They are lightweight, low-maintenance, and suitable for smaller buildings, requiring lower investment costs.

→ Intensive roofs resemble a classic garden (e.g., with grass), but require regular maintenance, irrigation, and a higher load-bearing capacity of the structure, so higher costs must be taken into account and they may not be suitable everywhere.

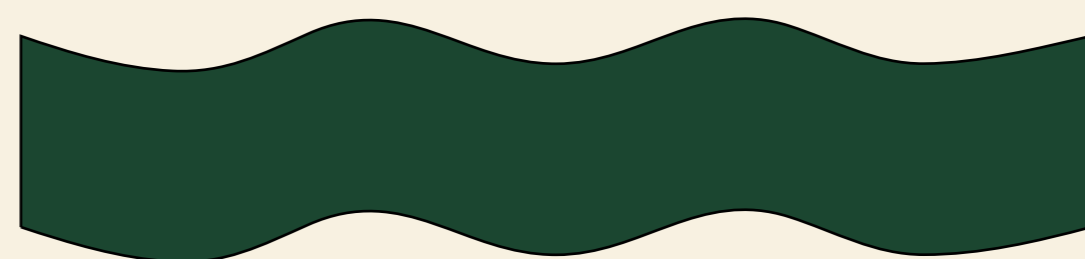
**Did you know...
that the cemetery in Nové Zámky was the first in Slovakia to install extensive green roofs on its existing columbariums?**

*Nové Zámky Cemetery, Slovakia
(photo: Urnovyhaj.sk)*





Changes and adaptations in favor of sustainability and biodiversity in the field of architectural and urban design are most effective in the long term, by creating a comprehensive concept through consultation and/or a project with experts—architects and landscape designers—with an emphasis on staging and phasing changes. Although this is a time-consuming process, certain measures are more affordable, take less time and can be implemented without the need for official permits.





**THE
TRANSFORMATION
OF CEMETERY
SERVICES**

Adam Vokáč

46

The changing role of cemeteries

Cremation continues to be more and more common in Czechia and Slovakia. There is a relative freedom in handling of the ashes here compared to neighboring countries—they can be placed anywhere with the consent of the landowner. This is a reason behind the emergence of a new interesting phenomenon—**cemeteries are no longer the obvious choice for a "final resting place."** For example, according to a survey by IPR Praha 2023 / data: STEM/MARK, **28%** of Prague residents prefer cremation with the scattering

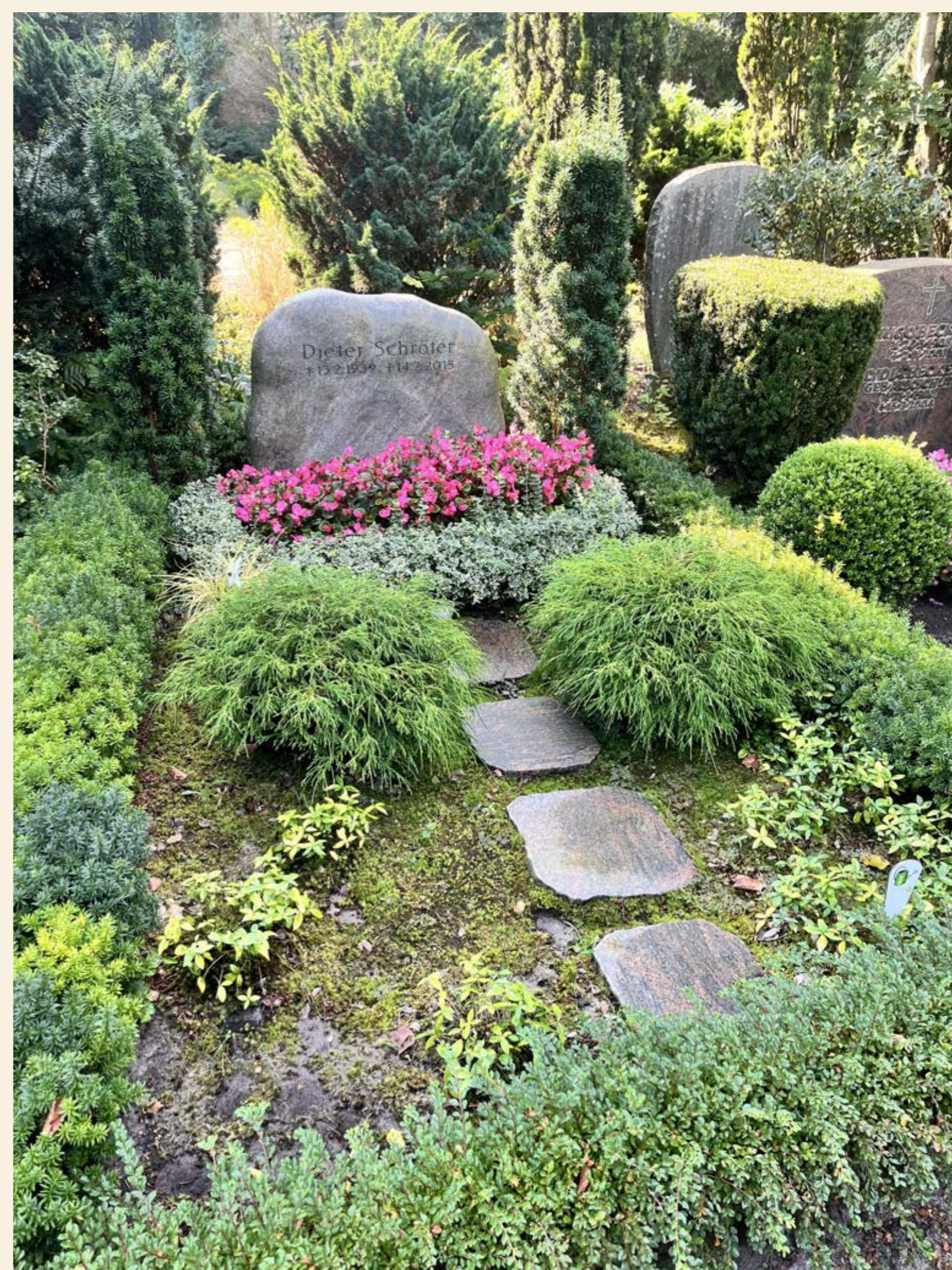
of ashes or storage outside a cemetery. The survey also states that **only a few respondents expressed a strong attachment to the cemetery** where they have a family grave; while the home was mentioned as a suitable place for storing remains.

It is worth reflecting on how we can be **responsive to the public's needs**, so that cemeteries do not lose their significance and continue to be sought-after **places of final rest and places for holding ceremonies of final farewell.**

The following factors certainly play a role:

- ➔ the form and quality of cemetery services
 - ➔ the pleasant atmosphere of cemetery grounds and their adaptation to the needs of the bereaved
 - ➔ a more varied range of burial and memorialization options
 - ➔ the opportunity for involvement and community gatherings
- ➔ These are possible steps towards making cemeteries more popular in today's society, so that we can build on their long-standing role as places to pause, remember, and honor the memory of the deceased.

In Germany, it is commonplace for cemetery services to include professional gardening care for grave (photo: Adam Vokáč)



WITH RESPECT TO THE BEREAVED

The Crisis of Ritual

Approximately one-third of cremations in Czechia take place without a ceremony, which, according to sociologist Olga Nešporová, reflects the crisis of ritual that the Czech and possibly also Slovak societies are currently experiencing.

"Secular rituals are largely emotionally empty, and traditional secular formulations lack conviction. Even replacing the speaker with music is not a sufficient solution. A ritual that lacks meaning is not very useful, which is why some bereaved families today decide not to hold one, while others opt for a more private version with limited participation by 'outsiders,'"

she states in her publication *Reflections on Death and Funeral Rites in Contemporary Czech Society*.

→ As cemetery administrators and caretakers, we should face this crisis head-on, accept our share of responsibility, and actively participate in resolving it.

The Significance of Secondary Rituals

Crematorium ceremonies are not usually part of cemetery services, but the subsequent **burial of the urn in the cemetery or scattering or pouring of ashes** are also opportunities for **rituals of equal significance**, even though the usual practice may not exactly suggest this. A typical ceremony at the crematorium gets a half-hour subsidy, while the burial of the urn or scattering or pouring of ashes at the cemetery is often **just a technical matter that takes five minutes**. We think we should take the opportunity for a so-called secondary ritual to **follow on from where the primary ritual ended** and give the bereaved time to follow the process in the slow rhythm of their grief. This moment can be a **symbolic end to mourning** and has the potential to bring a **sense of relief and acceptance**.

Ceremonial Burial

At our natural burial grounds, we have found that the practice of a "ceremonial burial," which lasts approximately half an hour, is a good compromise between a purely technical burial and a fully structured ceremony. It may consist of offering the bereaved several options for ways to remember and honor the deceased with small gestures before the actual burial.

We can provide, for example:

- a portable Bluetooth speaker to play a favorite song
- a table with writing materials to write final messages
- a bowl of water to float candles,
- flowers or other natural items growing nearby to decorate the gravesite,
- cards with guiding questions that can lead to shared experiences among the bereaved (e.g., "What is your fondest memory of them?").

TIP

Is there not enough staff at your cemetery to handle more time-consuming farewells? You can always team up with independent celebrants, which have really grown in number over the last few years.

At the beginning of such a ceremonial laying to rest, welcome the bereaved and familiarize them with these options available to them, before we proceed to the actual laying to rest. It is then appropriate to step back and give them enough space. Someone from the family will then usually give a signal that the laying to rest can begin. We believe it is important to respect this opportunity to remain for a while in the circle of family and friends, as it is often this intimate moment that leads to profound processes and experiences. Other bereaved family members may prefer to be accompanied throughout the process, and this should also be a possible option—prior communication is always important.



**Did you know...
that there are various training
courses available for celebrants
and those who accompany the
bereaved? Your employees can
obtain the appropriate training
through these courses.**

*Floating candles or writing or drawing messages
is a nice way to involve children in the ceremony
(photo: Adam Vokáč)*

Participation of the Bereaved

We have had good experience with families who wish to **perform the pouring of the ashes, burial of the urn, or scattering of the ashes themselves**, provided we give them the necessary instructions, ideally with a demonstration.

In practice, this may mean that we welcome the bereaved at the beginning, explain and demonstrate everything to them, and then **give them privacy** during the actual burial or scattering of the ashes. This can serve as an important therapeutic experience, and we should actively **offer it to them with the assurance** that they can handle it (but without insisting and always being prepared to step in).

When **burying a coffin in a grave or tomb**, the above also applies, with the addition that this is a **more demanding and risky activity**, so if the bereaved are participating, **special attention must be paid to their safety** and to the safety of those around them, and we must always **be ready to intervene**. Before digging the grave, carrying the coffin, lowering it, and filling the grave, it is necessary to **provide safety instructions** as part of the briefing.

➔ We recommend asking participants to **sign a waiver** confirming that the **cemetery administration accepts no liability** for any material or non-material damage they may cause. The waiver should also state that the activity is **voluntary, unpaid, and not subject to the Labour Code**.

Did you know...

that in Western countries a new trend is emerging in funeral and cemetery services, where professionals take on more of a guiding role? They are present throughout the entire process—from the transport of the body to the burial—but their main task is to provide support and expert oversight, while the bereaved themselves take an active, hands-on role.

Outdoor Ceremony Spaces

Outdoor ceremonies are becoming an increasingly popular alternative. They can be suitable for farewells with the coffin before cremation or burial, for ceremonies with an urn, or simply for memorial gatherings.

Whether purpose-designed spaces or open areas furnished with temporary seating and equipment, they offer something different from indoor ceremonial halls: a pleasant setting in the open air, often beneath the trees and accompanied by birdsong. Open spaces also give the bereaved the chance to find their own space for mourning—something that can be lacking in the confines of indoor halls, especially when many people are present.



After a brief instruction, the bereaved can lower the coffin themselves. Photo from a gravedigger workshop. (photo: HPS archives)

TIP

The furnishings of an outdoor ceremonial space can include sound equipment, chairs, and tables. Weather conditions can also be addressed by providing a tent and umbrellas for guests to borrow. Ideally, the cemetery also has a wooden gazebo or shelter available.



Outdoor ceremonial site at the cemetery in Elmshorn, Germany (photo: Adam Vokáč)

How to Communicate Changes to the Public

New cemetery services should be **clearly presented to the public**—for example, directly **during arrangements at the cemetery office**, where it is helpful to show clients the **full range of options** and explain what each service involves. Another opportunity to introduce the services and their variations is during a **walk through the cemetery when selecting a burial plot**. A useful approach is also to provide a printed **brochure** available at the cemetery entrance, as well as an electronic version on the website and social media.

WITH RESPECT FOR NATURE

Urn Burial and Depositing Ashes

Urn burials are becoming more environmentally friendly thanks to the expanding range of **eco-friendly biodegradable urns**. In terms of materials, these range from **highly biodegradable** options such as paper or papier-mâché to bioplastics such as **arboform or corn starch-based bioplastics**, which take a relatively long time to decompose in the ground. In an urn cellar or columbarium, even biodegradable urns can last for **many years**, while when buried in the ground, it is more practical to consider them as the case of **pouring the ashes into the ground directly**.

The question arises as to how long it is appropriate to wait before depositing ash in the same place

again. In our experience, **ash does not disappear** from the place where it was deposited even after 10 years; it merely mixes with the soil, but is **still recognizable**. In our opinion, it is best in such cases to **mix the ash as evenly as possible with the surrounding soil** so that it is no longer visible.

The Funeral Act does **not impose a minimum period** similar to the minimum decomposition period **in the case of ashes**. The timeframe after which it is appropriate to offer such a site for reuse is therefore mainly at the discretion of the cemetery administrator, taking into account the respect for the sanctity of the site, but also the limited capacity of the cemetery.

→ For example, in **Prague's Forest of Memories**, these plots are leased for **a period of 10 years**, with the option of an additional pouring of ashes after five years.

Did you know...
that in the USA, the UK, and Canada, commercial substrates are sold specifically for mixing with cremated ashes so that the resulting mixture has an optimal pH for planting?

Scattering of Ashes

Cremated remains are made up primarily of the **inorganic components of bone**, including strongly alkaline substances such as phosphates, carbonates, and calcium oxide. Because of their high pH, they pose a risk to **plants** in concentrated form: they cause dehydration, block nutrient uptake, and can even “burn” the roots. When sufficiently diluted, however, the effect can be neutral or even **mildly beneficial**—calcium and phosphorus may then serve as nutrients for plants.

It is therefore advisable to scatter ashes over **as wide an area as possible**. Since scattering is by nature non-specific, it is important to be firm that the bereaved **do not have the right to choose a particular scattering spot**. Otherwise, the practice often leads to overuse of typically favored **sites around trees**, where grass stops growing and the trees themselves suffer from the yearly accumulation of hundreds of kilograms of concentrated salts, resulting in the overall **degradation of the space**.



Ash interment site prepared for use in the Forest of Remembrance in Ďáblice, Prague (photo: Adam Vokáč)

TIP

According to professional literature, the sustainable amount of ashes that a scattering meadow can absorb is about 150 g/m² per season. We recommend carrying out this calculation for your own scattering meadow and setting an annual upper limit for the number of scatterings needed to ensure its long-term health.

Grave Burial

Burial can be made more environmentally friendly by regulating what may be placed in the ground along with the body. For example, cemetery regulations can realistically require that **all textiles used must decompose** within the standard period of decomposition. Coffins may also be regulated by restricting lacquered finishes or plastic and metal decorations. Local sustainability can be supported by discouraging coffins made of exotic woods. In case you have no control over the textiles used to clothe the body, it is appropriate to require the person arranging the funeral to sign a consent form allowing **verification of the clothing of the deceased.**

Did you know... that in natural burial grounds in the USA, graves are often dug only to a depth of one meter or less? At this depth, bodies decompose quicker thanks to greater access to oxygen and soil microorganisms. In our countries, however, this practice is not yet possible for legislative reasons.



*Burial at Meadow Cemetery in Prague-Ďáblice
(photo: Adam Vokáč)*

TIP

Lining the grave with spruce branches or other natural materials is not only aesthetically pleasing, but the layer also helps trap oxygen in the soil, which supports the decomposition of the body.

GREEN CEMETERIES

Establishing New Sections of the Cemetery

It is certain that the above changes are most easily introduced when **establishing new cemetery sections** or **entirely new burial grounds**. While in many respects it is desirable to adapt the services of more traditional cemeteries (for example by offering ceremonial burial/scattering of ashes), a good step—where possible—is to dedicate a new section or even a whole cemetery to this alternative approach, **allowing the public to choose according to their own preference**. If that is not an option, it is worth considering whether, in the future, a **less frequently used part of the cemetery**—such as an area with a larger number of abandoned graves—**could be set aside for this purpose**.

An undeniable advantage of establishing a new section or new burial grounds in this way is that the concept can be **approached comprehensively**, combining **multiple principles and practices** discussed in this publication. Principles such as minimizing cemetery waste, increasing the participation of the bereaved, caring for nature, supporting biodiversity, and providing both ceremonial and environmentally sensitive forms of interment—all of these reinforce one another and together form the concept of what we call green cemeteries.

Defining Green Cemeteries

In the USA and the United Kingdom, where green burial has a long tradition, **nonprofit organizations** have been established to create a **shared definition of green burial grounds** and set standards to determine whether a given site qualifies. On request, these organizations can **certify** individual cemeteries and include them on their official lists.

The American **Green Burial Council (GBC)** divides cemeteries according to its criteria into the following categories:

- ➔ **Conventional**—does not meet the given standards
- ➔ **Hybrid**—meets some of the standards
- ➔ **Natural**—meets the given standards
- ➔ **Conservation**—meets the given standards and also functions as a nature reserve

Standard	Hybrid Cemetery	Natural Burial Grounds	Conservation Burial Grounds
Accurately represent earned level of GBC certification in marketing materials, websites, and conversations with the public, clients, and the media.	✓	✓	✓
Provide clients and families with the opportunity to participate in the burial and ritual process, in keeping with state law and with these standards.	✓	✓	✓
Accept for burial only decedents that have not been embalmed or those embalmed only with GBC-approved, nontoxic chemicals.	✓	✓	✓
Prohibit the use of a vault (partial, inverted, or otherwise), a vault lid, concrete box, slab or partitioned liner in the burial plot.	✓	✓	✓
All burial containers, shrouds, and other associated products made only of natural, biodegradable materials.	✓	✓	✓
Develop a Maintenance and Operations Manual to be utilized by all staff members, contractors, and volunteers to implement site goals, policies, and best practices.	✓	✓	✓
Establish an endowment fund to ensure the long-term maintenance of the site by setting aside at least 10% of all burial plot sales.	✓	✓	✓
Conduct an Ecological Impact Assessment, starting with a property baseline document that includes existing ecological conditions and sensitive area analysis. Update periodically to assess future property/habitat conditions and plant inventory.		✓	✓
Restrict access and burial operations within sensitive areas as identified in the Ecological Impact Assessment.		✓	✓
Use operational and burial practices that have no long-term degradation of soil health, plant diversity, water quality, and ecological habitat.		✓	✓
Limit the type and size of memorial markers so that they do not impair the ecological conditions and aesthetic of the natural cemetery landscape.		✓	✓
Site conditions as identified in the Ecological Impact Assessment and sensitive areas analysis will restrict burial density on the property; therefore, Natural and Conservation burial grounds will have limits to allowable burial density. For Natural Burial, the cemetery's average density shall not exceed 500 burials/acre. For Conservation Burial, average density shall not exceed 300 burials/acre. Burial density of sensitive areas may be transferred to less restricted areas on the property to maximum densities of Natural Burial – 600/acre, Conservation Burial – 400/acre.		✓	✓
Establish and apply strategies that conserve, preserve, enhance, or restore the historic native or natural habitat and flora of the region.			✓
Conserve or restore a minimum of 20 acres, or 5 acres if contiguous to other protected land.*			✓
Operate in conjunction with a government agency or a nonprofit conservation organization that has legally binding responsibility for perpetual monitoring and enforcement of the easement.			✓
Guarantee preservation of the burial ground by deed restriction, conservation easement or other legally binding and irrevocable agreement that runs with the land and is enforceable in perpetuity.			✓

Within the general definition provided by the Green Burial Council:

Green cemeteries aim to offer the bereaved a profound and meaningful experience in an environment where the landscape and its inhabitants are carefully cared for—both above and below the ground.

In Czechia and Slovakia, and in the European Union as a whole, **similar evaluative standards have not yet been established.** As a result, the label “**green cemetery**” **does not carry the same weight**, nor can it be relied upon to indicate a specific approach or practice. Each cemetery administration may **interpret the term differently**, and while they may choose to follow the principles and standards outlined above, they are not obliged to do so.

Upholding the Concept

To ensure that green cemeteries retain their **unique character**, a certain level of **discipline is required from the bereaved**, who typically have limited rights regarding how they may modify their grave plots or what items they may leave as offerings. It is important to **anchor this concept in the cemetery’s regulations** or an addendum, and to make sure tenants are fully informed before signing the contract. Afterwards, it is essential to ensure the rules are **consistently followed** in practice. Even small concessions can inspire others to deviate from the guidelines, and the cemetery can surprisingly quickly take on an undesired appearance, ultimately causing dissatisfaction among all involved.

TIP

By choosing a gravesite in green burial grounds, tenants actively contribute to the local environment. This contribution can also be a reason to offer a reduced fee for the gravesite.

Did you know... that green burial grounds are often popular because their natural character spares the bereaved the effort of maintaining the grave?

CLASSIFICATION OF GREEN CEMETERIES BY BURIAL METHOD

We can explain the different methods of interring ashes and burials by looking at existing green cemeteries in Czechia (Les vzpomínek, Luční hřbitov, and Údolí vzpomínek) and in Slovakia (Záhrada spomienok and Les spomienok).

Interring Ashes to Tree Roots

Les vzpomínek (Forest of Memories) in Prague's Ďáblice, and by extension Les spomienok in Košice, introduced to our region the concept of green cemeteries where ashes are placed at the roots of trees. Around usually mature trees, 6–8 spots are typically marked in a circle approximately 1,5 meters from the trunk. Ashes are placed in these spots either by pouring into small hole or in biodegradable urns. Gravesites are then indicated with small wooden tags (Czechia) or metal tags (Slovakia) attached to the tree trunks. No other markings are allowed, as the sites are meant to blend seamlessly with the forest undergrowth.

The advantage of this type of green cemetery is that it **requires less maintenance** than perennial beds or meadow vegetation and needs less watering during dry periods. It is also **quicker and less expensive to implement**. If there are mature trees in or near the cemetery with enough space around them, consider reserving them for this type of ash interment—of course, within the framework of an appropriate concept anchored in the cemetery regulations.

TIP

When digging at a close distance from a tree, it is likely that you will encounter its roots. Extra care should be taken to avoid damaging them unnecessarily. If a larger root is found in the hole, it is not a problem to simply move the hole slightly so that the root no longer presents an obstacle.

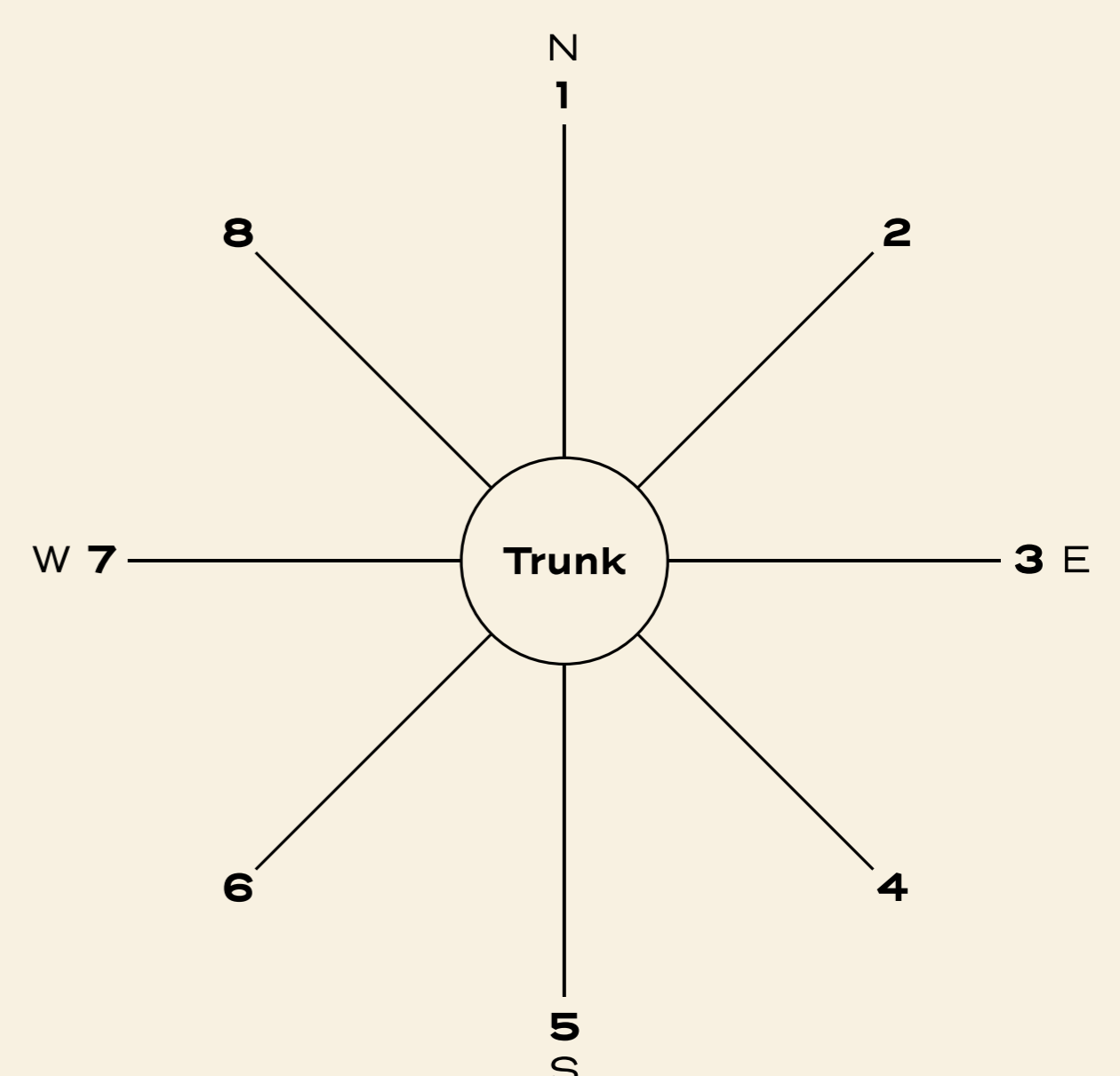


Diagram showing the placement of holes around trees in Les vzpomínek (Forest of Remembrance), their orientation, and numbering (graphics: Jakub Smitka)

Interring Ashes in Flower Beds

Ashes are placed in **perennial and meadow beds** either by pouring into a small hole in the ground or in a biodegradable urn, as practiced in **Záhrada spomienok (Garden of Memories)** in Zvolen and in **Brno's Údolí vzpomínek (Valley of Memories)**. **Along the edges of the beds**, gravesites are carefully marked so that digging does not disturb the perennial plants. This is important because direct contact between the ashes and plant roots could “burn” the roots due to the ashes' high alkalinity and inhibit nutrient intake. In Zvolen, the names of the deceased are displayed on **small stone plaques made from local stone** at each gravesite, while in Brno, memorialization is centralized in a shared space, where **metal nameplates** are attached.

It is important to keep in mind that, due to climate change, **maintaining perennial beds will require increasing amounts of water** for irrigation. We therefore recommend favoring **drought-tolerant plant species** and establishing such sections only if the cemetery has its own well or retention tank, or if building one is included as part of the project.

Did you know... that, in the upcoming perennial garden project in Prague's Košíře, ashes will be placed directly with the plants, pre-mixed with soil, not into designated gravesites but within larger sectors? This method is therefore somewhat closer to scattering in some respects, and to burial of ashes in others.

Burial in Meadow Strips

For natural-style burial of whole bodies, **Luční hřbitov (Luční Cemetery)** was established in Prague, and in Zvolen a dedicated area was set aside within **Záhrada spomienok (Garden of Memories)**. At Meadow Cemetery, gravesites are arranged in **meadow strips** that line grassy pathways, and the deceased are marked with **wooden plaques on metal stands** at the foot of each grave. In Zvolen, the sites are marked with small stone tablets. The **gravesites** are sown with a meadow seed mix and **mowed by hand using a scythe** twice a year. After digging, any excess soil is heaped on the grave, and after approximately one year—once it has settled—the grave is allowed to **merge seamlessly with the surrounding meadow**, with additional sowing if necessary.

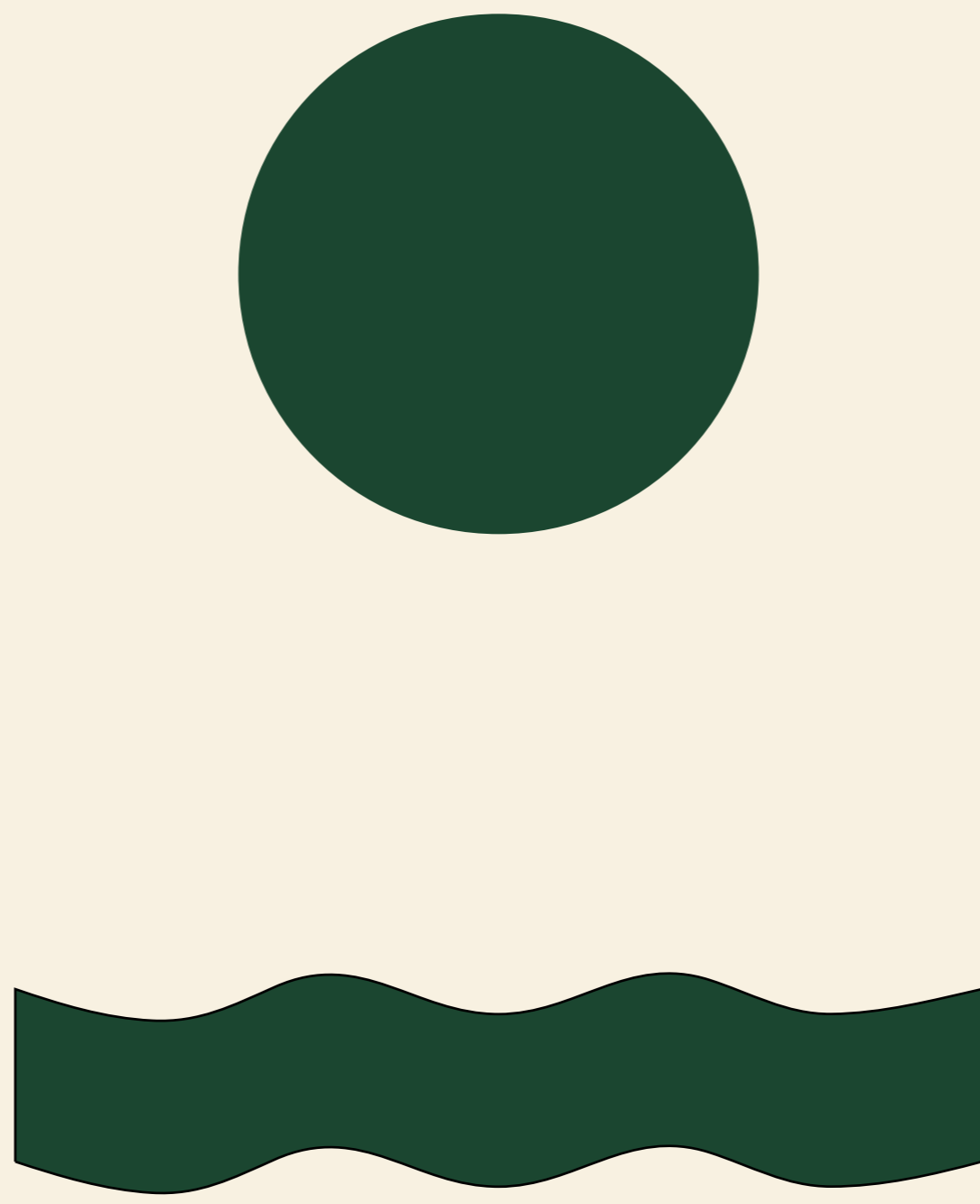
From the perspective of maintenance and water use, this type of green cemetery falls somewhere between the low-maintenance approach of **Les vzpomínek (Forest of Memories)** and the intensive care required for perennial gardens. With regard to nature, it is advisable to practice **mosaic mowing**, planning the cutting of each section so that insects and other small wildlife always have areas of meadow to take shelter in. **Part of the meadow can even be left uncut** over the winter—even dried stalks carry symbolic meaning in this context, serve an aesthetic purpose, and provide winter habitat for insects.

TIP

Mowing the meadow at the cemetery can be turned into a pleasant community event, where members of the public are invited to gather and tie bouquets from the freshly cut flowers.



Visitors collecting flowers during the mowing of Luční Cemetery in Prague's Ďáblice (photo: Adam Vokáč)





MANAGING CEMETERY WASTE

Monika Kossuth

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Waste generated in cemeteries is often a major concern for their caretakers. In this chapter, we will look at the composition of cemetery waste, the challenges of its separation and recycling, and offer inspiration on how to manage it in ways that make your cemetery more sustainable.

CEMETERY WASTE

Cemetery waste is the refuse generated within the grounds of the cemetery and usually comes from two main sources:

- **Grave maintenance** (especially artificial flower decorations, grave lights, inserts for lights, remnants of candles, discarded vases, flowerpots, live plants, statues, and other small decorative objects, but also raked leaves or used rags);
- **Grounds maintenance** (leaves, grass, branches, etc.).

While in the first case the main producers are the **grave tenants**, and the waste is made up of many different components, in the second case the **cemetery caretakers** are the ones responsible, and the waste is predominantly green waste.

Waste bins may also occasionally contain smaller or larger amounts of **construction debris** from the building or renovation of graves, although it is usually the duty of stonemasonry companies to **remove** this material. On some cemeteries, however, it is common for such debris to end up in the vegetation at the edges of the grounds.

There is a lack of precise data on the proportions of different components in cemetery waste.

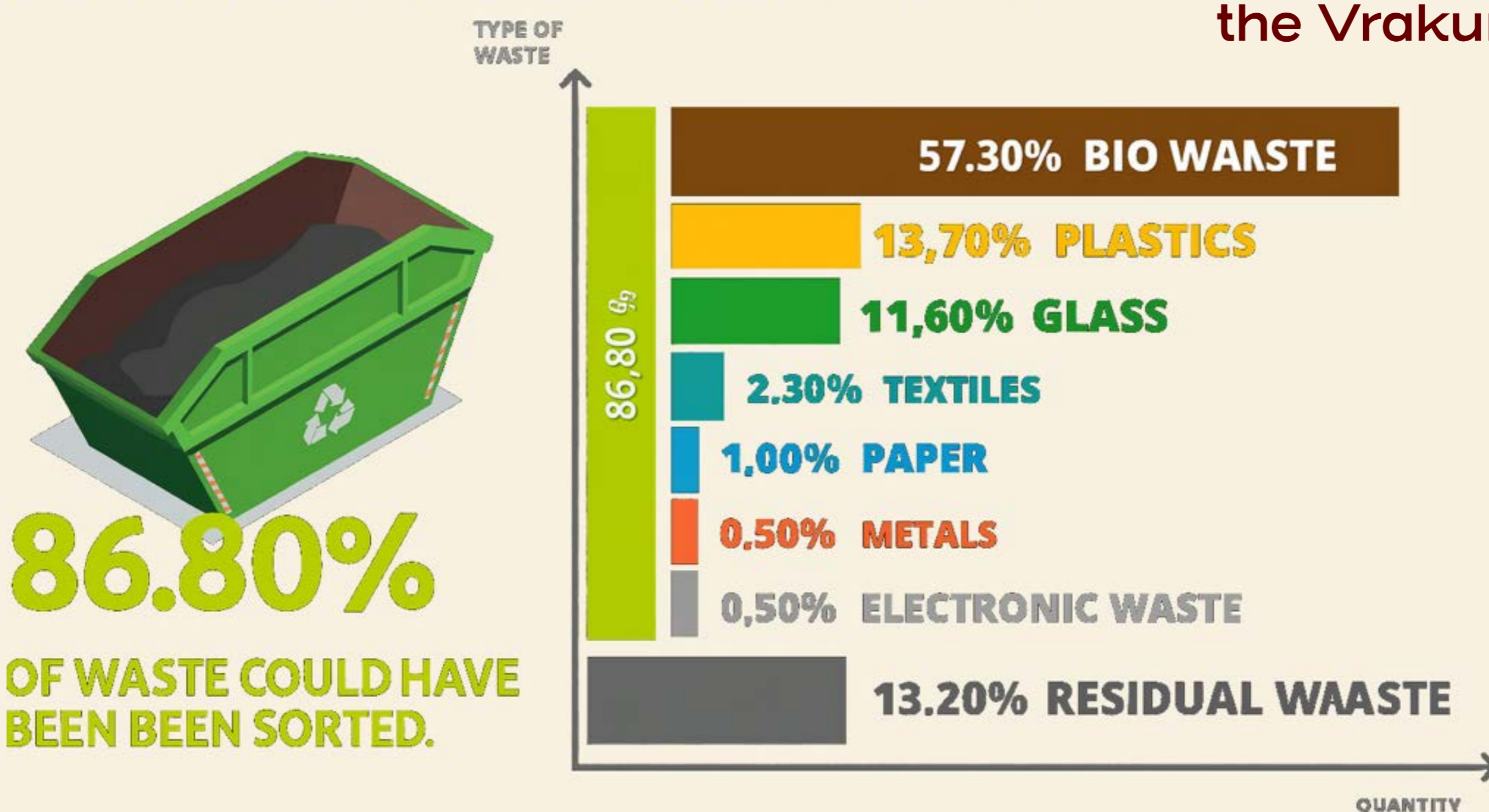


There are usually only large-capacity waste bins for mixed waste in cemeteries (photo: Funebra archives)

One of the available insights in this area comes from the observations of cemetery caretakers, who note that the **most waste** is generated in the **autumn months** of September–November, when people prepare graves for All Souls’ Day. A better understanding of cemetery waste could be gained through

professional analyses of the contents of bins. One such analysis was carried out in October 2021 by the municipal funeral service Marianum in Bratislava, together with the Center for Environmental and Ethical Education Živica and the company JRK, at the cemetery in the Vrakuňa district of Bratislava.

RESULTS OF WASTE ANALYSIS - VRAKUŇA CEMETERY



Waste analysis, Vrakuňa Cemetery, Bratislava, 2021 (photo: JRK)

In this analysis, we see that the most sensible approach is to separate:

- ➔ the most common type of waste, **green waste**, which can be further **composted**;
- ➔ **glass**, which can be **recycled**.

Small remnants of wax do not interfere with glass recycling and will burn off at high temperatures. It is important, however, to remove any plastic inserts that may contain wax, as well as plastic or metal lids and bases from glass candles. Glass is easy to identify, so at least visitors do not face the dilemma of where to dispose of it. It is also advisable, when purchasing candles, to check that they are actually made of glass and not a glass–plastic composite.

We, however, also recommend collecting the following in recycling bins:

- ➔ **electronic waste**, even though it made up only 0.5% of the container’s volume. This mainly consisted of LED candles containing batteries, which can contaminate the container through chemical leakage or even cause fires in the container or at the sorting facility. We expect that this type of waste now constitutes a larger share of the container, as the use of LED candles continues to grow;
- ➔ **leftover wax**, as it can still be effectively used in the production of new candles.

Did you know...

that in western Slovakia, the collection service Reparaf operates by placing special red recycling bins for wax at selected cemeteries, clearly marked for this purpose, and also collects them afterwards? The wax is recycled into blocks that can be reused or directly made into candles that protect fruit trees from frost. In Prague and in Dubnica nad Váhom, there are also wax collection programs, with the collected wax being processed and made into candles for Ukraine.

How should the other types of waste be handled?

Plastic waste consisted mainly of **artificial bouquets and wreaths**, which cannot be recycled and at best can be recovered for energy, as is also the case with residual waste. In general, only a few types of packaging can be recycled from plastic waste—for example: PET packaging, HDPE packaging (e.g., fabric softener bottles), LDPE

packaging (e.g., cheese wrappers), and products made from PP (e.g., yogurt cups).

Other types of waste were present only in minimal amounts, and it is uncertain whether it is worthwhile for the cemetery to place special bins for them on site and pay for their collection.

CHALLENGES OF COLLECTING AND RECYCLING CEMETERY WASTE

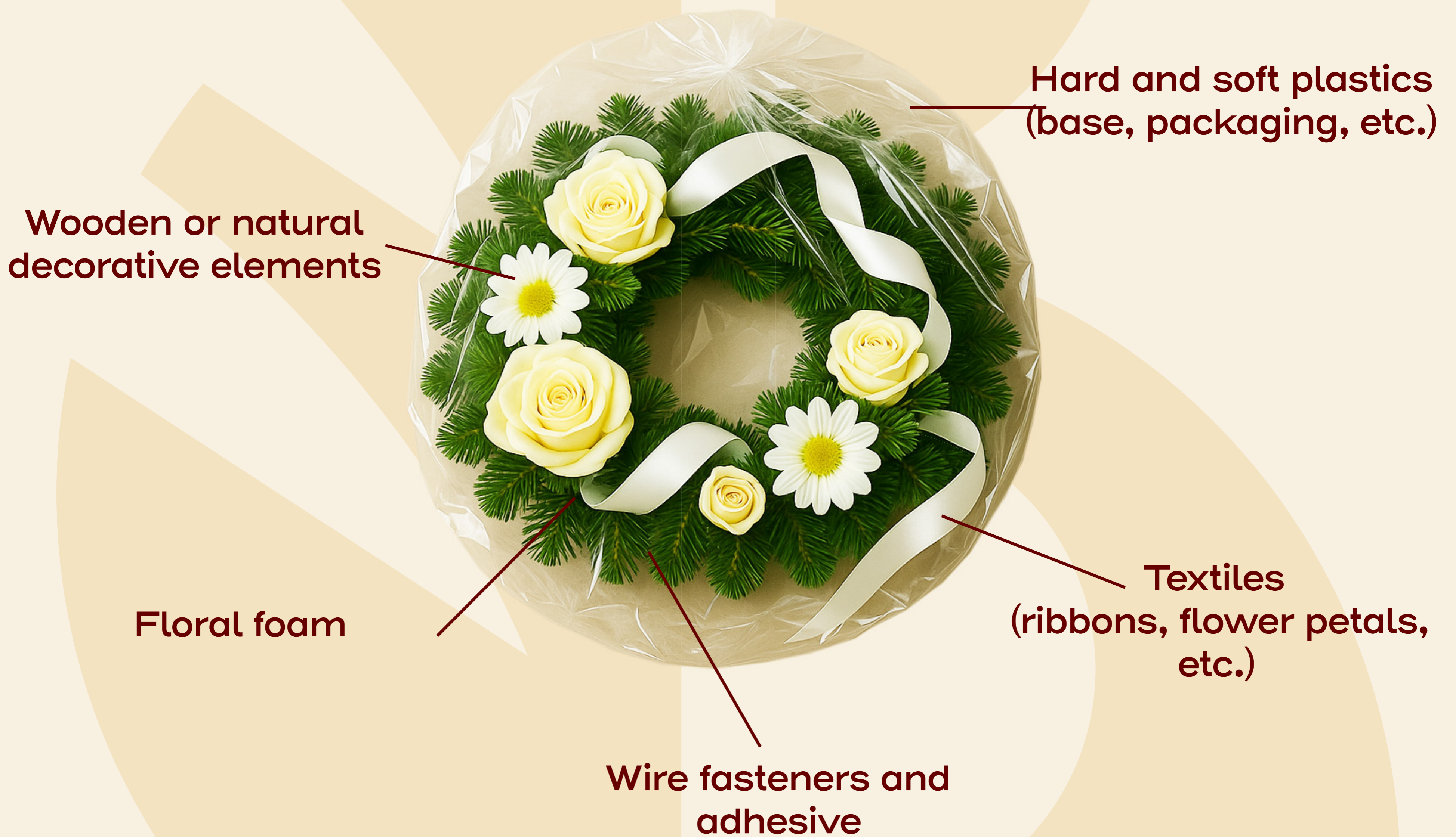
When visiting a typical cemetery, two common scenarios may be observed:

→ The cemetery has **only mixed-waste bins** on its grounds, often large-capacity ones, placed near the entrances (or sometimes only at one entrance), at the back of the cemetery, or along paths between graves.

→ The cemetery also has **separate bins for sorted waste**, but often each is placed at a different location, and upon inspection, the **waste in them is still mixed**.

Many towns and municipalities collect cemetery waste only as mixed waste because it contains so many different materials that are hard to separate—or are contaminated with each other. As a result, the waste ends up incinerated or sent to a landfill. This is a shame, especially for the green waste, which could easily be composted and put to further use. For the other components, it is more understandable that administrators might consider separation unnecessary.

Consider a typical artificial wreath—what kinds of materials might it contain?



It is questionable whether it is even possible to properly separate such an item into recyclable components. In some places, wreaths are thrown into a dedicated bin, in others into mixed waste, or sometimes into the plastic bin.

Even traditional glass candles are often multi-component—they usually have a plastic or metal lid and base, a plastic insert with wax remnants, or wax directly on the glass.

Proper sorting of plastic/metal, glass, and wax depends on the visitors—they must separate the components and place them in the correct yellow, green, or black bin, or, where available, in a special bin for wax collection.

What are the chances that a visitor will actually separate the waste if each of the three bins is located in a different part of the cemetery?



It is common, for example, for a green-waste bin to contain:

Traditional grave candles most often also have plastic or metal parts that need to be removed before disposal (photo: Pixabay)

- ➔ Potted plants still in their pots;
- ➔ Leaves raked from graves placed in plastic bags (which makes them easier to carry from the grave to the bin);
- ➔ Fresh bouquets still wrapped in cellophane which therefore do not enter the compost.

Glass grave candles often end up in green-waste bins along with their plastic lids or bases, while hazardous electronic candles—which should be treated as electronic waste—sometimes find their way into the plastic bin.

This mixing of materials can lead to waste collectors refusing to take the contents of the bins. In some areas, cemetery waste is incinerated or recovered for energy, while in others it is still landfilled—the least efficient method of waste management. In 2022, approximately 40% of waste in Slovakia and the Czech Republic was landfilled. Some regions, however, now have sorting facilities that can separate and recover valuable components before the remainder is sent to a landfill.



It is common in cemeteries for plant waste to be thrown away together with packaging (photo: Funebra archives)

Ten years ago, the problem of cemetery waste was attributed to the absence of a separate collection system at cemeteries. Today, even in smaller municipalities where recycling bins are now available, it is clear that the real issue lies in the composition of the waste and the unwillingness of visitors to separate it. With this in mind, what could help in this situation?

Did you know...
that, according to the Waste Act, municipalities are required to ensure the collection of biodegradable waste from cemeteries?
This helps increase the likelihood that at least the green portion of cemetery waste will be put to meaningful use.

SOLUTIONS

According to the waste hierarchy, the three most effective ways to manage waste are prevention—i.e., avoiding the generation of waste—minimization, and reuse. Once waste has been produced, the priority should be to recycle as much as possible, then recover energy from non-recyclable components, and, as a last resort, send the remainder to a landfill.



How to proceed in a cemetery?

Prevention

If you do not want a certain type of waste to pile up in the cemetery, the most effective step is to limit the kinds of decorations people are allowed to bring in. This, however, requires setting clear regulations on what can and cannot be used as decoration. You can read more about how to make such systemic changes in the framed section below called **How to Change the Rules**.

This shift can also be supported by adjusting what is sold directly on the cemetery grounds. For example, you might restrict the range of goods to fresh flowers and dried natural products only.

Type of decoration	CO ₂ per grave	Recyclability	Landfill/incinerator waste
living, natural	0,3—0,5 kg	80—100 %	minimal
artificial + LED candles	4,5—6,5 kg	< 20 %	80 % +

The ecological footprint of living grave decorations compared to artificial ones—calculated from a comparison of the ecological footprint of real and artificial Christmas trees. (source: ChatGPT)

Waste Reduction

When it comes to minimizing waste generation, information campaigns can be an effective tool. They raise visitor awareness and encourage choice of more sustainable alternatives.

→ **prepare leaflets or set up information boards** explaining how to sort waste and informing on what natural alternatives are available (leaflets can be distributed to mailboxes, placed at the cemetery, in public spaces, or local shops; use local radio or newspapers, etc.);

→ **during All Souls' Day, set up an information booth directly at the cemetery** where people can learn about alternatives—or even make their own wreaths or bouquets from fresh flowers in cooperation with a local florist.

Visitors should be informed of this option in advance so they do not arrive with a plastic wreath already purchased;

→ **clearly label bins** with a description of what belongs inside;

→ **consider also the appearance of the bins**—if they are large and prominent, they can subconsciously signal that a large amount of waste is expected here. Bins can affect the overall aesthetic level of the cemetery both positively and negatively. Their placement should take into account both accessibility for waste collectors and the overall impression on visitors



Large-capacity bins reduce the aesthetic value of the site and encourage the accumulation of mixed waste. Moving them requires machinery, which can damage lawns or walking surfaces. Smaller bins are easier to handle and conceal. (photo: Funebra archives and ChatGPT)

Reuse

The practice of returning unwanted or unneeded items into circulation is taking root in Slovakia and Czechia. Libraries of things and reuse centers, where items are given a second life, are gradually spreading. This principle can also be applied in cemeteries, for example with grave candles or wreaths.

➔ **Reuse of grave candles / wreaths:** Collection points for used grave candles—designated cabinets where visitors can leave still usable but unwanted decorations (cleaned), allowing others to take them instead of buying new ones.

➔ **Borrowing grave candles / wreaths:** Decorations can be returned to a designated spot after the holidays for others to use again.

Make sure to inform visitors about the rules of reuse clearly and directly on site.



You can dedicate a cabinet for unwanted grave candles, lanterns, or wreaths, where visitors can take them and avoid buying new ones. Source: Unsplash (photo: Summer Rune, Unsplash)

Recycling

We recommend starting with a waste analysis and adjusting the type of recycling bins based on its results. Knowing what kinds of waste are generated at a specific cemetery can help set up an effective collection system. You may even find that some types of waste are not worth collecting separately, saving money on bins and their disposal.

At All Souls' Day, trained volunteers can be on hand to guide visitors in sorting their waste. This kind of support both increases the amount of waste sorted correctly and helps visitors learn the system, so that they know how to do it themselves next time.

We also recommend seeking out local recyclers for specific waste types—for example, the Reparaf service in western Slovakia, or various associations that collect candle wax for reuse.

How to Change Cemetery Rules

Changing the rules is often an unpopular measure, but it can lead to real improvements. It can help reduce the amount of waste generated at the cemetery and give management better control over the types of waste produced.

From our experience, city or municipal officials and cemetery managers are usually most concerned about public reaction. Visitors have long been accustomed to decorating and arranging their graves as they wish, so it is understandable that new restrictions may provoke resistance from some.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT SUCH A MAJOR CHANGE

Have a plan—define what you want to achieve and how you will make the transition easier for visitors:

→ Set clear, measurable goals—for example, aim to reduce total waste by half and achieve 90% proper sorting within three years.

→ The smallest unit of a cemetery is the grave, so start there—how can individual graves be made as environmentally sustainable as possible? Visitors could be offered tools for care or comprehensive maintenance services. You might offer discounted rates for those who do not cover graves with stone slabs during establishing or renovation, for instance.

→ Encourage the sale of fresh or dried flowers at the cemetery entrance (initially offering special prices to promote uptake).

→ At first, motivate visitors with initiatives such as: bring us your old plastic wreath or bouquet, and we will exchange it for a natural one. This allows people to experience firsthand that natural alternatives can also be long-lasting.

→ Inspire visitors with new or alternative ways to remember loved ones—for example, virtual candle-lighting platforms that can include a story about the deceased, or QR codes on graves linking to personal life stories that visitors can scan to learn more.

Prepare People for the Change Gradually

→ Communicate clear goals—for example: by 20XX, we want all cemeteries in our city to be free of plastic flowers and decorations.

→ Explain the reasons clearly—for instance: every year, we remove X tons of waste, which must be incinerated or sent to landfill, costing us X amount of money. With that budget, we could plant X number of trees within the cemetery grounds.

→ Frame the change as a shared effort, not a ban—for example: “Let’s work together to make this cemetery more nature-friendly... here are five things you can start doing right now.”

→ Provide guidance—leaflets on decorating without generating waste, how to choose sustainable candles, etc.

→ Use visual aids—for example: “This is what our cemetery could look like without plastic decorations.”

People are very sensitive to bans and orders, but they are more willing to join in positive change.

Communicate Patiently

- Take visitors on a guided tour of the cemetery to point out issues—for example: this complicates maintenance, this is a safety hazard, this cannot be recycled, etc.
- Create a space for discussion where people can come and ask questions—this can help alleviate their concerns.
- Involve local groups in the effort, such as senior clubs, gardening associations, or clergy—depending on what works in your city, district, or municipality.
- Show examples from other countries or cities where the changes you are proposing have already been successfully implemented.

The time you devote to people will be repaid in their commitment and cooperation.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLE →

**Osobowicki Cemetery,
Wroclaw, Poland**
(Research: Wroclaw
University of Science and
Technology, 2019)



Light-colored tombstones and planting on the grave are preferable to dark tombstones with horizontal overlap (photo: Anton Darius, Unsplash)

Basic Information:

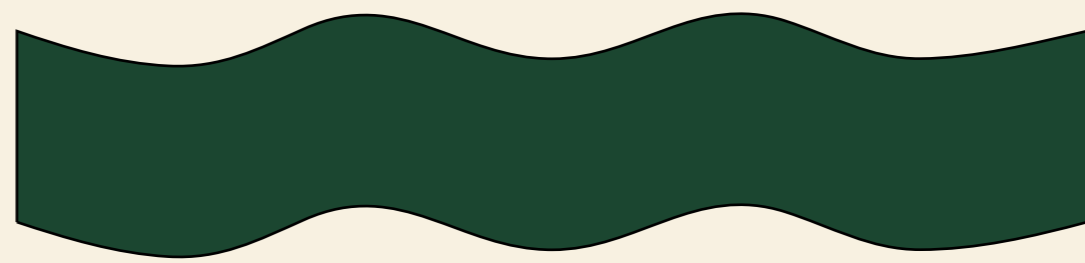
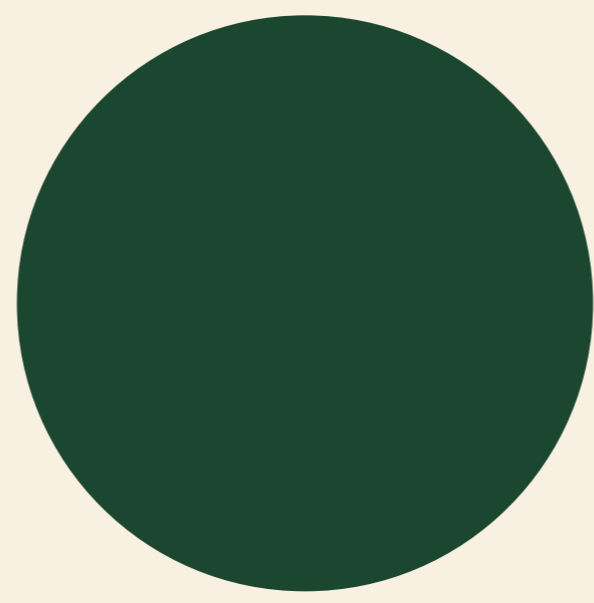
- **Area: 52 ha; half of the bins are for sorted waste.**
- **Three categories are sorted: plastic, glass, and green waste (81–92% correctly sorted); the remainder goes into mixed waste bins.**
- **Around 10% of waste comes from cemetery maintenance (bio-waste, small repairs, etc.); the rest consists of items brought to the graves.**

Observations:

- Glass is sorted most effectively—only about 5% of the contents in glass bins are incorrect, mainly plastic inserts from grave candles.
- In plastic bins, the most common items are plastic grave candles contaminated with paraffin/wax, plastic flower pots, and bags. The biggest risk is electric candles with batteries.
- In bio-waste bins, contamination mostly comes from plastic and glass fragments.
- The share of bio-waste in mixed waste is only 13–17%.

Lessons Learned:

- For separated waste collection to be effective, there must be a sufficient number of bins, well distributed throughout the cemetery.
- Placing bins for all waste types next to each other can increase proper sorting—i.e., if colored bins are placed beside mixed waste bins, visitors are much less likely to throw everything into the mixed waste.
- Adequate waste collection is essential—if a bio-waste bin is full, visitors tend to use the nearest available bin regardless of its intended category.
- Ideal bin placement is at entrances and at intersections of paths.





CEMETERIES AS MULTI-PURPOSE SPACES

Andrea Uherková

CEMETERIES AS PUBLIC SPACES

Cemeteries are often seen primarily as places for burials, visited only during funerals or to honor the memory of deceased loved ones. However, this perspective can be broadened, as cemeteries are **areas with great potential** to function as fully-fledged public spaces. In this chapter, we explore inspirations for the various roles cemeteries can play while maintaining respect for their visitors.

Taking a Walk and Reflecting

In many countries, it is common for people to visit cemeteries simply to **walk and relax**. In Slovakia, for example, the Ondrejský Cemetery in Bratislava is well-known for this, while in Czechia, popular examples include Olšany Cemetery or Vyšehrad Cemetery in Prague.

To attract people to stroll through a cemetery, we do not need to wait decades for trees to grow, for infrastructure to be built, or for interesting graves to appear. Elements that draw visitors can be incorporated even into cemeteries that have only existed for a few years. It is important to **consider these aspects when planning new cemeteries as well**.

A central place for lighting candles can also be a work of art with neutral symbolism (photo: Funebra archives)



What Makes a Cemetery a Place People Enjoy Visiting?

- **Size** – Generally, the larger the cemetery, the longer people tend to spend time there, for example, walking around. However, size is not the only factor.
- **Abundant Greenery and Shade** – Park-like cemeteries attract visitors for strolls. It is important to ensure sufficient shade. Before mature trees grow, structures such as pergolas over benches or small pavilions can serve this purpose well.
- **Benches and Other Seating Areas** – Seating should offer enough privacy, while also being safe and visible from a distance.
- **Paths and Loops** – Visitors who come to walk or explore need longer and interesting routes, ideally with paved surfaces suitable for strollers or wheelchairs.
- **Architecture** – Attractive features such as ceremonial halls, historic graves, artworks, diverse materials in furnishings, or temporary land art can draw visitors.
- **Privacy and Tranquility** – Relaxation areas (benches) work best if they are not near busy roads or close to ceremonial sites. They should provide peace and a sense of safety while remaining visible from afar.
- **Safety** – Security can be enhanced through fencing, camera systems, and occasional police patrols.
- **Spiritual Openness** – A cemetery is more welcoming when it maintains spiritual openness and neutral symbolism. Societies include people with diverse beliefs and spiritual perspectives. For example, a Christian cross could be replaced with an artwork that does not symbolize only one religion, allowing each visitor to find personal meaning.
- **Events** – Memorials, educational, or cultural events open to the public can also attract visitors (discussed further below).

Did you know...

that the kind of language that surrounds us has a strong impact? Commands and prohibitions can be replaced with gentler wording that fosters cohesion between cemetery caretakers and visitors. Communication specialists can provide guidance on this. Graphic designers, in turn, can help improve the cemetery's visual identity, creating more attractive informational boards and notices. When implementing major changes in a cemetery, it is important to communicate them well in advance, sensitively and clearly, emphasizing the benefits for both the space and its visitors.

Space for Last Wishes

For most people, it is difficult to discuss last wishes—the end of life, or their preferences for their own funeral—with loved ones. Yet such conversations can be very helpful for those who may need to make these decisions in our absence. Cemeteries can be places where these topics are easier to approach, because we are intimately surrounded by the presence of death.

Cemeteries can help frame death as a natural part of life and encourage conversations about last wishes through **thoughtful design**—planting greenery that changes shape and color throughout the year (deciduous trees and shrubs that reflect nature's cycles), incorporating **artworks**, or creating spaces for **reflection** and intimate conversations in a **safe environment**.

We recommend introducing visitors to how the cemetery operates through regular public tours. In selected areas, a system could be established to **reserve grave plots in advance** and pay for their lease during one's lifetime. This can increase interest in the space and contribute to the cemetery's financial sustainability. However, this step must be **carefully considered** in terms of cemetery capacity, as leasing plots without placing remains could fill the space sooner than desired.



The cemetery setting can encourage people to discuss their last wishes and the end of life (photo: Funebra archives)

Space for Art

Art has always been a traditional and essential part of cemeteries, **reflecting and shaping our relationship with death**. Artistic creation can be meaningfully integrated into these spaces to support the bereaved in their farewells and remembrance.

The aesthetic quality of a cemetery can be enhanced through **temporary or permanent artworks**, as well as through **well-designed furnishings**. A specific form of art that addresses the themes of transience and the preciousness of life are **land art and eco-art** pieces made from materials such as wood, clay, or stone. These works change under natural processes, sometimes disappearing entirely or blending into the landscape. Such pieces may stay in the cemetery only for a short time, until the weather wears them down, or for longer periods. Students or local artists can be invited to take part in the creation of these artworks. More durable artworks with neutral or natural symbolism can be made from **wood, stone, concrete, or metal**. It is beneficial for cemeteries not to carry the symbolism of just one religion.



Land art pieces can be created during memorial celebrations, for example on All Souls' Day (photo: Funebra archives)

TIP

A cemetery can serve as a thematic studio for art students or art schools. Their works can then be exhibited in the cemetery. The artworks may be placed along the edges of paths and walkways, or on the fence on the perimeter of the cemetery.

Visitor-Friendly Features

Cemeteries that are welcoming to people provide good facilities for those coming to attend a funeral, visit graves, or simply take a walk. Visitor experience can be supported by offering **thoughtful services and features**.

→ **Space for Cyclists:**

Currently, many cemeteries prohibit entry to cyclists. We recommend reconsidering these bans, since cemeteries are often large areas and bicycles are frequently used by older visitors who find cycling easier than walking long distances. In any case, it is important to install bike racks in a **guarded, sheltered spot** within the cemetery grounds, so visitors do not have to leave their bicycles in the parking area or outside the gate.

→ **Space for Four-Legged Companions:**

Most cemeteries also prohibit dogs. It is up to cemetery management to decide whether to revise these rules, or at least relax them in certain sections where dogs could be allowed. Nowadays, many people own small dogs that can easily be carried in their arms.

Many dogs can be carried by their owners during cemetery walks (photo: Funebra archives)



**Did you know...
that Prague's Motol
Crematorium includes
a bistro, Café Crema?
On weekdays, it offers
specialty coffee and
sweet treats.**

TIP

**During All Souls' Day,
hundreds of people
visit cemeteries,
usually in cold weather.
Why not place a mobile
cart with coffee or tea
near the cemetery
entrance to warm and
delight visitors?**

Offering coffee or tea can comfort and warm visitors during the chilly All Souls' Day period (photo: Funebra archives)



Book sharing usually works on the basis of borrow and return. In a cemetery, however, a rule could be applied that books remain on the grounds, so visitors may read or browse them while sitting on benches. (photo: www.pixabay.com)

→ **Space for a Cup of Coffee:**

Cemetery visitors often come from different parts of the country, sometimes traveling long distances. Many would appreciate the chance to refresh themselves with a cup of coffee or a small snack alongside their visit to the graves of loved ones. Such a space can also serve as a refuge for small groups after funerals, especially when no formal gathering follows.

→ **Space for Reading**

In recent years, book-sharing libraries have become popular in public spaces, often placed near benches where visitors can sit and read. In a cemetery, such a small library could contain books devoted to themes of life and death. Today, there is a wide range of quality literature for both adults and children that approaches these subjects in a very sensitive way.



CEMETERY AS A COMMUNAL SPACE

If the local community is to see the cemetery as a place of added value and build a relationship with it, residents should feel like **co-creators of the space**. Ideally, they are **involved from the very beginning of its creation**, but this can also happen during the **cemetery's ongoing operation**.

Community Work and Volunteering

Whether a space is private or public, people develop a sense of belonging to a place when they **participate in its care**. Ideally, they feel part of a larger community with a shared purpose. In a cemetery, this purpose could include creating new perennial flower beds, designing and installing artworks, or organizing public cultural events. As a rule, the more **environmentally sensitive the management of the cemetery and its greenery**, the **more hands are needed** to replace harmful machines or chemicals.

TIP

If you are creating a new cemetery, you can conduct an online survey among residents to learn what they would like the cemetery to include in order to make the space functional for them. Another good approach is to hold a public discussion about the proposed cemetery and its design—especially if it will feature innovative uses of the space or new forms of burial. The discussion can also be streamed online and archived on the town's website. Focus groups made up of different segments of the population can also be very helpful.

How can the local community get involved?

- If mowing is done gently and in a mosaic pattern, you can **organize a workshop on scythe mowing**. People can help mow, turn, and rake the hay.
- Create areas for flowering perennial plantings; residents can help plant and care for them throughout the year.
- Invite artists to work with the community on a collective **land art (eco-art)** project. Artworks made from natural materials can enhance the cemetery's aesthetics for a shorter or longer time, and families with children can easily take part.
- During All Souls' Day, you can involve residents in an **awareness campaign to reduce waste**.

Did you know... that Záhroda spomienok, the first natural cemetery in Slovakia, was created and continues to operate largely thanks to volunteers? Dozens of city residents, company employees, and students from the Faculty of Ecology and Environmental Sciences in Zvolen help with major plantings and green maintenance during “workdays” held several times a year.

TIP

In Slovakia, you can take part in Volunteer Week, organized annually by Volunteer Centers. With the help of individuals or groups, cemetery spaces can be improved and maintained. In recent years, corporate volunteering has also become very popular, with company employees joining in public-benefit activities.



Volunteers often return to the natural cemetery in Zvolen to assist with maintenance, many of them local university students (photo: Funebra archives)

Cultural Events

Cemeteries should remain peaceful spaces that preserve dignity and reverence. However, this does not exclude social events with a cultural focus or aimed at nurturing body and mind. The important thing to keep in mind is the form of the event and the location within the cemetery where it takes place. In many countries, such events are commonly part of cemetery life. **Examples include:**

- ➔ Poetry or prose readings—Intimate public readings of poetry or prose. Today, there is plenty of literature addressing the end of life and death, for which the cemetery can serve as a meaningful backdrop. Readings can also take place at the graves of notable authors.
- ➔ Acoustic concerts—Small-scale, acoustic performances without amplification, which can be a part of book readings or memorial celebrations. Concerts can be held in chapels, ceremonial halls, under tree canopies, or in cemetery meadows.
- ➔ Silent concerts—Music is transmitted directly to visitors via wireless headsets or radio waves rather than through speakers, creating a more intimate and personal atmosphere.
- ➔ Theatrical performances—In collaboration with actors in period costumes, performances can be combined with guided tours focused on history, death, and culture.
- ➔ Photography exhibitions—Showcasing the cemetery’s history and its notable figures.
- ➔ Light installations—Evening light shows, such as “Night of Lights” in Vienna or “White Night” in Bratislava.

**Did you know...
that at Lakewood
Cemetery in Minnesota
(USA), people have been
communing for over 150
years? Current public
events include guided
cemetery tours, musical
concerts in the local chapel,
Sunday yoga sessions, and
tea ceremonies combined
with support circles for the
grieving.**



Acoustic music can accompany farewells under the tree canopies as well as various public events (photo: Funebra archives)

Movement and Meditation

Just like in city parks, quiet, flat, grassy areas of a cemetery can be used for **Tai Chi** or **yoga**, where only the instructor speaks and sessions are conducted in silence. **Meditation** in a cemetery can encourage awareness of one's own mortality, creating a revitalizing and reflective experience.

Did you know...
that in **Záhřada spomienok** in **Zvolen**, an annual **All Souls' celebration** is held? Visitors can light candles for deceased loved ones in a designated area, write or draw a "message to the heavens," and hang it on a string between trees. Calm music is played, and tea and coffee are served. Children too enjoy taking part in this celebration.

Memorial Celebrations

On significant or commemorative days, cemeteries can serve not only for individual remembrance but also for group ceremonies. Spaces for collective remembrance can be created during events such as **All Souls' Day** or the **Day of Hope**—a day dedicated to remembering deceased children (of any age), which is commemorated in many countries.



*During the All Souls' celebration, children also write "messages to the heavens"
(photo: Funebra archives)*

CEMETERY AS AN EDUCATIONAL SPACE

Cemeteries can also serve as educational spaces for various **expert-led or experiential tours for the public, as well as school excursions.** In many countries, especially at historic cemeteries, **guided walks** are popular, during which participants learn interesting facts about history, architecture, or notable graves at the site.

Every cemetery holds **unique stories of people** that can enrich the town's cultural heritage. Many cemeteries now feature **maps of notable graves** and plaques with life stories located directly at the gravesites.

In addition to highlighting important graves, a sense of belonging can be fostered through the presence of **artworks by local artists.**

These may include sculptures (on gravestones or freestanding), paintings, installations, or poems displayed on the walls of ceremonial halls.

Did you know...

that many cemeteries offer evening or nighttime tours focusing on history and architecture? At Forest Home Cemetery & Arboretum in Milwaukee, USA, tours emphasize the art and symbolism of gravestones. At Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, USA, tours focus on graves of notable women in the history of the city.

Events at cemeteries can help people recognize the true value not only of the cemetery itself but also of the towns and cities they belong to. Increased awareness of the site often leads to greater interest and care.

Examples of such events include:

- **Themed guided tours with experts**—focusing on notable personalities, military history, or architecture.
- **Genealogy workshops**—involving the search for ancestors or reading old gravestones.
- **Environmental education programs**—cemeteries can serve as unconventional spaces for environmental education for both the general public and schools. When the ecological benefits of the cemetery are presented in an engaging and accessible way, they are better understood and appreciated, and can also inspire other areas of life and foster a stronger connection to the environment.



Environmental and ecological footprint excursions can be engaging for students from primary, secondary, and higher education, as well as for the general public (photo: Funebra archives)

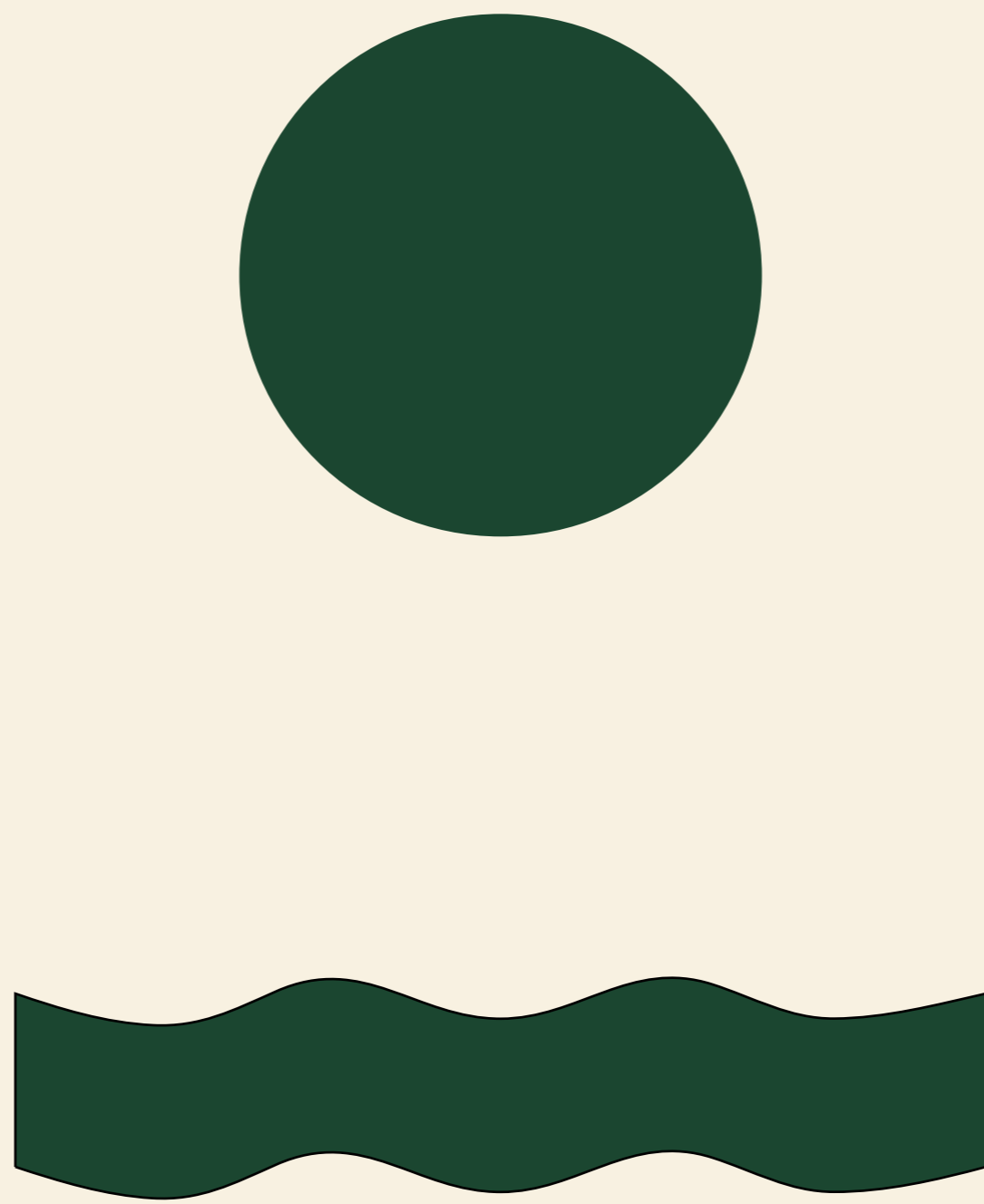
Did you know... that at the cemetery in Zvolen, our association Živica organizes educational programs for students and teachers focused on the ecological footprint of cemeteries and burial practices? During these programs, we analyze decorations on graves as well as the contents of trash bins. We discuss environmentally friendly alternatives and ways to support biodiversity within the cemetery.



Children's insect excursion at Ďáblice Cemetery in Prague. The event with an entomologist was organized by Hnutí Brontosaurus. (photo: Adam Vokáč)

TIP

If your cemetery has enough mature greenery, try organizing a morning birdwatching excursion with an ornithologist in April or May to learn bird calls. Similarly, you can invite an entomologist to explore insects in the cemetery.





INSPIRATION FROM ABROAD

Anna Sovová

90

After reading this handbook, you might be left with the impression that applying all of our recommendations to your cemetery—and creating an environment more welcoming for flora, fauna, and people—is simply too much to manage, perhaps even impossible. But we have good news for you: it is possible, and we can prove it. On the following pages, we present practical examples from abroad, where many of the changes and measures described in previous chapters have already been successfully introduced. These places can serve not only as inspiration, but above all as motivation—not just for cemetery caretakers, but also for the wider public, who, once they become familiar with different approaches to what cemeteries can look like, may eventually start asking for such changes in their countries as well.

Each of the cemeteries described below illustrates one or more of the issues in question—some focus more on water management, but pay less attention to mowing. Elsewhere, hardy perennials are planted on gravesites, but little regard is given to habitats for animals or the upkeep of pathways. Together, they show that it is not necessary to introduce every measure all at once. Even small changes can make a big difference.

BIODIVERSITY

*“Let’s Help Hedgehogs!”
St Andrew’s Churchyard—
Chesterton, England*

A major issue in cemeteries and in public green spaces across England is the decline of **hedgehogs**. They are now classified as an endangered species, with populations falling rapidly throughout the country. Organizations such as the **British Hedgehog Preservation Society** and **Cambridge Hedgehogs** are working on guidelines and programs to support hedgehog populations—including in cemeteries.

One such initiative took place in Chesterton, at the churchyard of St Andrew’s, as part of the **Cambridge Hedgehogs Churchyard Project**. (This historic cemetery is no longer used for traditional burials, only for ash scatterings.) The project was divided into several phases:

first, the site was surveyed before and after new features were introduced; then came the practical phase, with interventions designed to improve the habitat. These included installing water dishes and hedgehog houses, leaving piles of decaying wood, and creating openings in the cemetery walls to increase landscape connectivity and allow hedgehogs to move more freely through urban spaces.

The final stage of the project focused on community outreach. This makes St Andrew's churchyard an excellent example of how **local people can become actively involved in cemetery care**. The improvements were carried out in collaboration with residents and a local scout group, turning the effort into a participatory event.

Also, the grounds of this cemetery are not subjected to intensive mowing. Instead, there are wildflower meadows, and an insect hotel has also been installed—meaning that measures to increase biodiversity have been taken in a more comprehensive way.

Rainwater Management: Purewa Garden—Auckland, New Zealand

Managing water in urban environments is an urgent and pressing issue. Cities often suffer from droughts, and proper water management can be vital for maintaining a healthy urban microclimate. Cemeteries, too, can play a role in this. At Purewa Garden in Auckland, rainwater is collected and reused as part of an innovative approach to water management.

A new system has been installed that captures rainwater from the roof of the cemetery chapel and stores it in five tanks



*Installing water dishes for hedgehogs
(photo: www.pixabay.com)*

TIP

Be online! Follow the accounts of foreign cemetery organizations—Instagram, Facebook, YouTube — inspiration for positive change can often come from these new sources.

with a total capacity of up to 100,000 litres. This water is then used to irrigate flowerbeds throughout the cemetery. During summer, maintaining these flowerbeds can require up to 10,000 litres of water per day.

The system also includes a sensor that prioritises the use of collected rainwater when it rains, before switching to the mains supply. This makes the system not only more environmentally friendly, but also economically efficient.

Perennials Instead of Gravestones: Žale Cemetery—Ljubljana, Slovenia

As part of ASCE (Association of Significant Cemeteries in Europe), the 2024 initiative Cemeteries for a More Sustainable Europe involved 22 participants from seven European countries. In Slovenia, cemetery caretakers were invited to experiment with replacing traditional gravestones with drought-tolerant perennial plantings in the cemeteries they manage. The initiative was particularly successful in the cities of Maribor and Ljubljana.

In 2025, during the Week of Discovering European Cemeteries, two model graves featuring low-maintenance, drought-tolerant plantings were created at Žale Cemetery.

These plantings require less water and upkeep, offering a practical example of how cemeteries can adapt to increasingly frequent droughts and declining rainfall in the years to come.



*Rainwater storage tanks at the cemetery
(photo: www.purewa.co.nz)*



*Drought-tolerant planting on a grave
(photo: www.significantcemeteries.org)*

TIP

Go for a trip! The best inspiration comes from traveling and experiencing the genius loci of foreign cemeteries firsthand.

CARING FOR GREENERY IN CEMETERIES

Urban Gardening and Cemeteries in Harmony—Vienna, Austria

Cemeteries in Czechia and Slovakia are today generally understood primarily as spaces for burial and mourning. This has not always been the case: historically, cemeteries also served as places for public gatherings, social life, and gardening. This productive function is now experiencing a revival in the form of urban gardening in Vienna's cemeteries.

Since 2023, the administration of Vienna's cemeteries has allowed users to grow fruit and vegetables in plots at the Vienna Central Cemetery (Wiener Zentralfriedhof) and the Southwest Cemetery (Friedhof Wien Südwest). The project has been very successful, and the areas dedicated to cultivation continue to expand year by year. The plots are established on meadow areas where there are no graves. The initiative aims to promote

the idea that cemeteries are not only places of mourning, but also spaces for community interaction and environmental education. For some participants, these garden plots offer the experience of communal gardening; for others, they may even provide a way of coping with loss and grief.

Each plot measures 24 square metres and at the beginning of May each year it is handed over to users with seedlings already planted. All gardeners are offered expert advice and have the option to borrow gardening tools.

TIP

Try looking at your cemetery from a different perspective. What else could the space offer? An area for concerts, theatre, or community activities? The possibilities are only limited by your imagination!

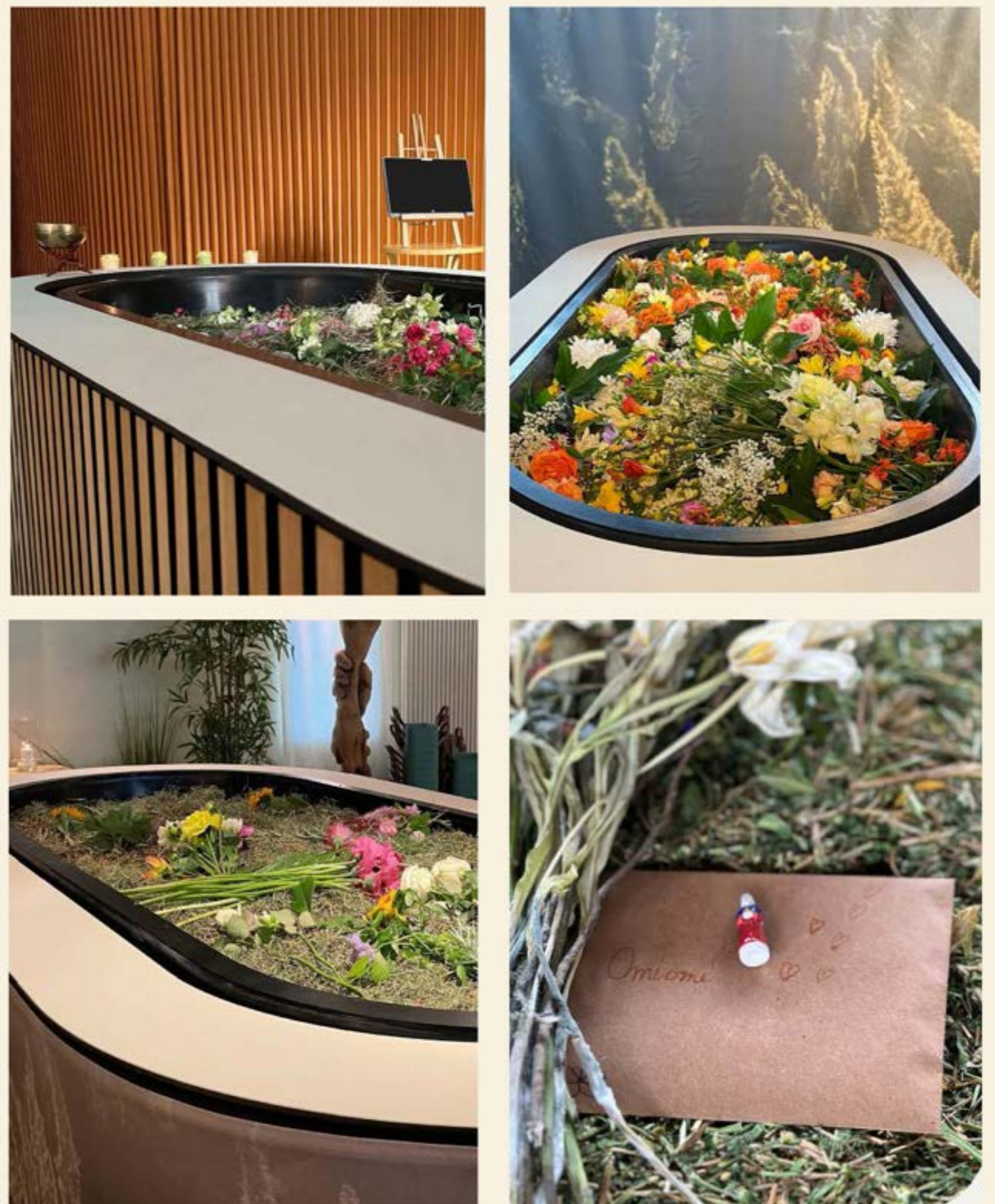
INNOVATION

New Burial Methods – Germany

Just as the legalisation of cremation a century ago transformed the funeral industry, in the near future new burial methods may similarly change how we approach death. Whether it is terramation, currently legal in 13 US states and Germany, alkaline hydrolysis, or the use of fungi and mycelium, these approaches—closely linked to ecological practices and reducing the carbon footprint of burials—have the potential to reshape cemeteries as well as funeral rituals.

In Germany, terramation has been legally permitted in a trial capacity for several years. People who choose this form of burial often seek a different kind of farewell, one that traditional burials do not provide. Terramation can be understood as a controlled, accelerated decomposition of organic matter in a mixture of plant material, and other natural substances. At the end of the process, the resulting soil, known as terramat, is similar in composition to humus. In this way, the human body is “transformed” into earth.

The process takes place in a specialised terramation chamber. During the ceremony, while loved ones say their goodbyes, they may place messages or flowers into the chamber, or help prepare and cover the body with plant material.



Lacing flowers and messages into a terramation chamber (photo: Reerdigung / Meine Erde)

The terramation process itself takes around a month, giving families time to process their loss. The handling of the resulting terramat varies according to national legislation. In the United States, family members may divide the material, which can then be placed in a garden, forest, or natural reserves designated for this purpose. In Germany, terramat is still treated as human remains: it must be wrapped in cloth and buried in the ground. Some cemeteries in Germany have adapted to this new form of burial and now offer plots with terramation in mind.

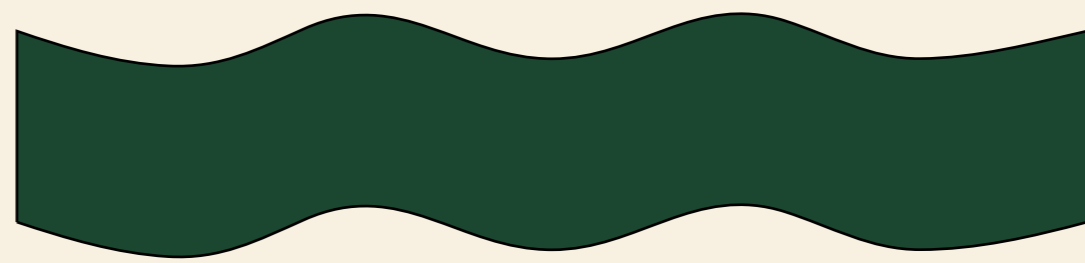
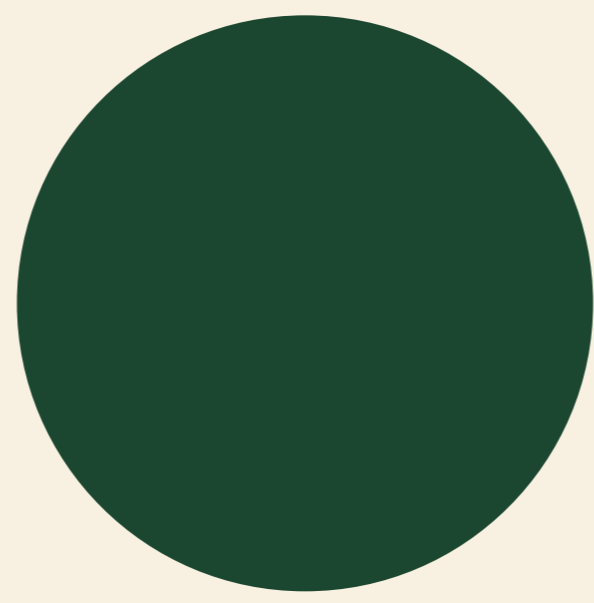
For example, Elmshorn Cemetery, in the state of Schleswig–Holstein, has expanded and now contains a forest cemetery with meadow areas. Here, terramat is buried wrapped in cloth in shallow graves, either near newly planted or mature trees, or within the meadow. It can also be buried in a traditional grave, where flowers can be planted instead of a headstone. Several other cemeteries in Germany have adopted similar approaches, providing spaces for terramation burials.

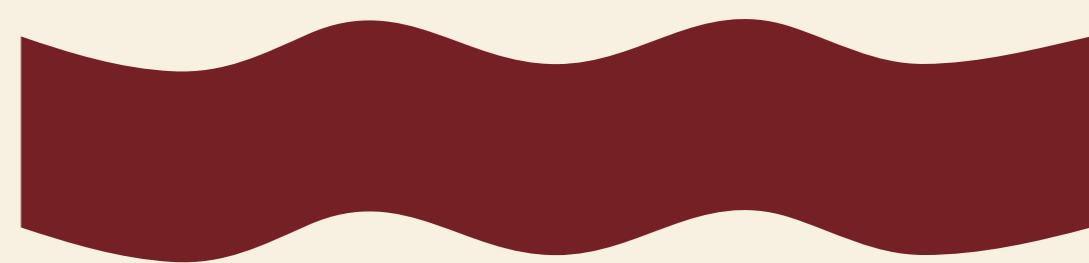


*Terramation burial
(photo: Reerdigung / Meine Erde)*

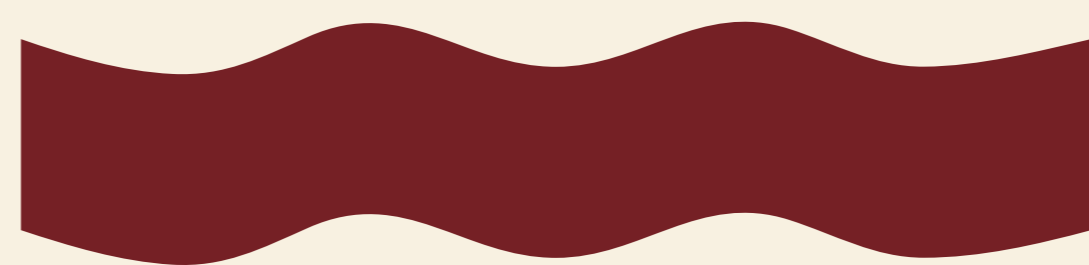
TIP

If you are planning to create a natural cemetery in your town, or to expand an existing cemetery with a natural section, think ahead and set aside an area where terramat could be buried in the coming years.





IN CONCLUSION



IMPLEMENTING CHANGES

Thank you for taking the time to read these pages. We know well that talking about transforming cemeteries is one thing—actually carrying it out is another, far more challenging. We understand the reality of how difficult it can be to change established cemetery practices that have been in place for decades, seemingly without problems. You may encounter reluctance from colleagues or subordinate staff, a lack of support or funding from management, or even find yourself gradually losing the energy and motivation to make changes. We have decided to dedicate the conclusion of this handbook to addressing these situations, so that together we can see these efforts through to completion.

COLLABORATING WITH STAFF

Getting your colleagues excited about doing things differently may not be easy. "We've always done it this way" is a kind of cemetery mantra, and it can be difficult to get seasoned workers in particular to change their approach. They may ask what they will get out of it, if we are asking them to do something extra. It would be ideal to offer some kind of financial reward, but we know that our options in this regard are often very limited.

The advantage is that some of the changes we propose actually save work, such as less intensive mowing, mosaic mowing, or leaving fallen leaves in the cemetery alleys. So when we take away here, we can afford to add elsewhere. Other colleagues may also be motivated by the fact they are contributing to a meaningful cause, once we familiarise them with the issue. Younger generations may be more receptive to these topics and more willing to change their approach. And let us not forget the importance of help from volunteers, and even from the bereaved themselves.

PROJECT FUNDING

To fund these projects, we recommend applying for a grant from a national or European funding program. In areas such as blue–green infrastructure, adapting public spaces to climate change, or supporting biodiversity, there are several suitable funding opportunities available, and the relevant organizations are usually happy to assist us with the application process.

If we are unable to get our management on board for such projects, it is a good idea to remind them that this direction is likely to be in line with the strategy of our city or governing body, and to refer to the relevant documents. Last but not least, this kind of activity is always a good PR move—the media likes to publish about new trends in the funeral industry, and the public also shows a surprisingly high level of interest in these issues.

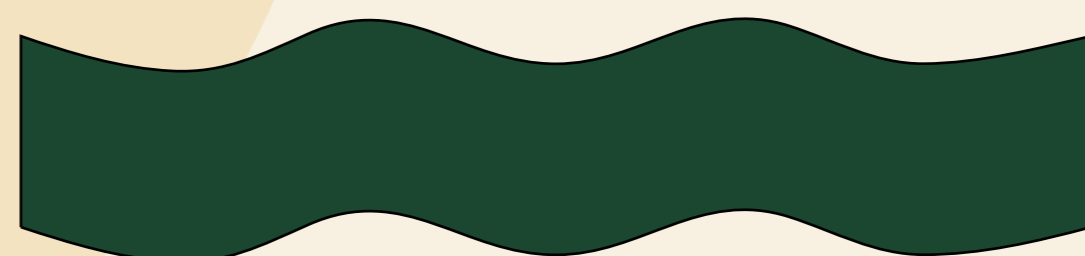
PERSONAL MOTIVATION

"It does not matter how slowly you go, as long as you do not stop." This quote from Confucius feels the perfect conclusion to this guide. We opened this publication by noting that cemeteries should be changed step by step, so that they do not lose their unique character and continue to provide a sense of pause in time for those who need it. At the same time, we know that it is practically impossible to achieve much in a short period. Let us therefore accept that the pace of these changes can be relatively gradual—perhaps we can commit to introducing something new each season, gradually allowing both the public and staff to get used to it.

Having a new goal ahead of us and keep moving towards it is important for maintaining our own motivation.

Knowing there is no rush is reassuring, but at the same time, we should never fall into lethargy and become mere guardians of the status quo. Every small change we make for the staff, the public, and nature in the cemetery is a fulfilling reward, and with this approach, we can thrive in our role long term.

It is natural to need to find a new spark of motivation from time to time. At such moments, it helps to realize that there are many of us with the same goals, that we are not alone. In every city or town that manages cemeteries, someone is probably dealing with similar problems as you. It helps to share our journeys, what has worked for us, and what we need advice on. If needed, feel free to reach out to us, we will be happy to assist you even beyond the last page of this handbook.





ABOUT

THE AUTHORS



FUNEBRA

Funebra is a project of the Centre for Environmental and Ethical Education ŽIVICA. It focuses on natural cemeteries, personalised forms of farewell, and raising awareness about an open and responsible approach to death.

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POSLEDNÍ STOPA

Poslední stopa (“The Last Footprint”) is a Czech association engaged in educational and pioneering activities concerning new possibilities in funerary practices, inspired mainly by the ideas of the international Green Burial Movement.

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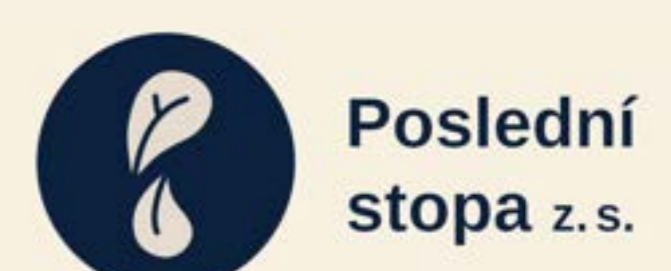
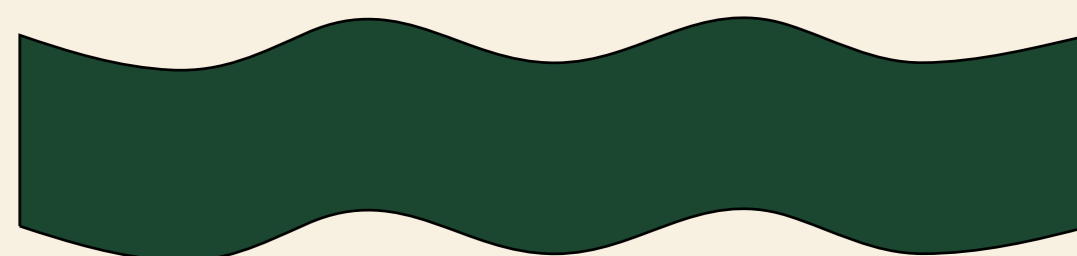
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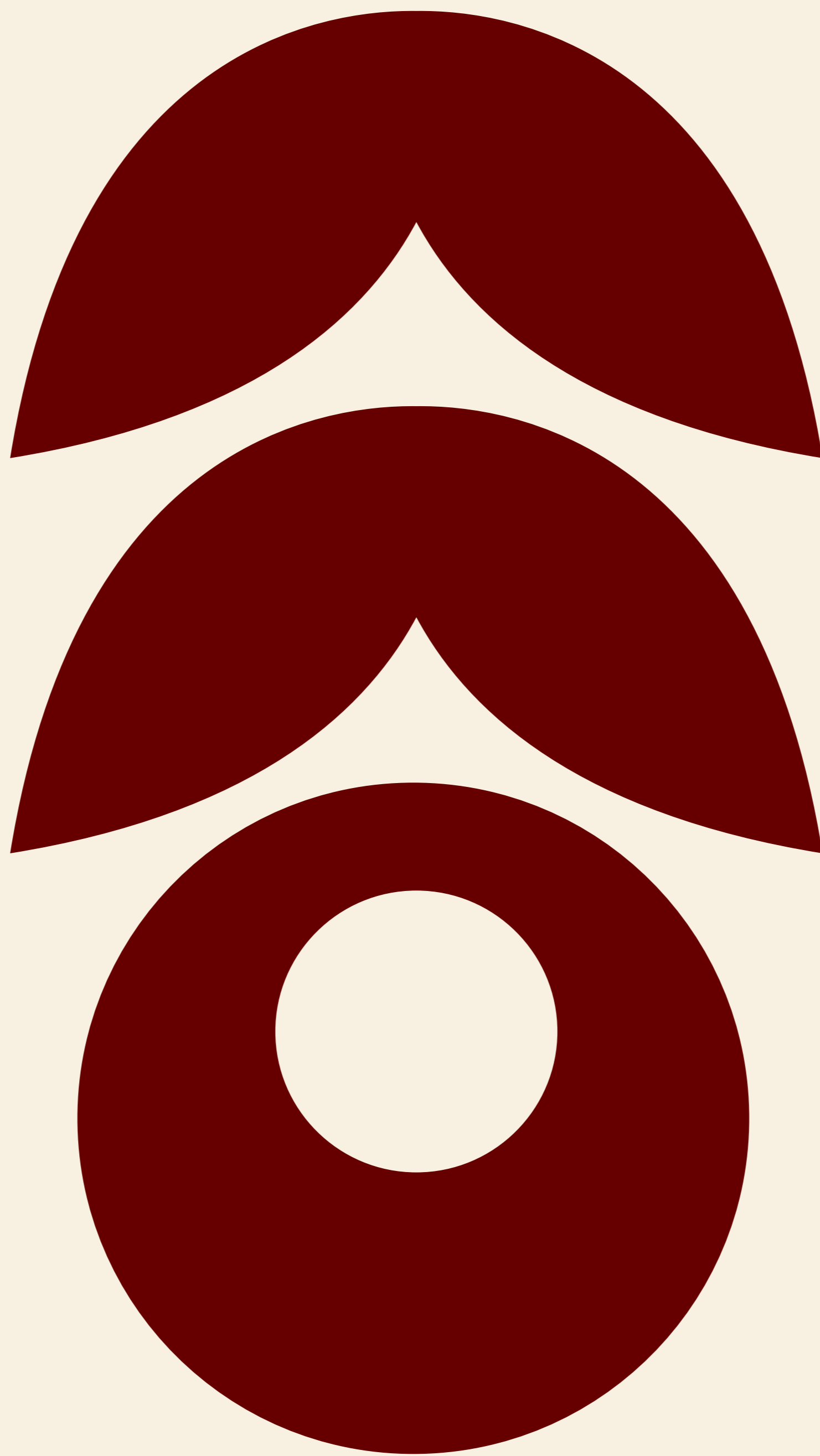


The authors (photo: Uľa Mičovská)

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**Cemeteries friendly to nature are cemeteries
friendly to people.**