

Pet Loss Support Page



The Final Farewell: How to Handle a Pet's Remains

by Moira Anderson Allen, M.Ed.

In other articles, I've talked about the most painful decision a pet owner ever has to face—the decision about whether, or when, to euthanize a pet. But the death of a pet brings with it yet another difficult decision, and one which you may not be prepared, at the moment of loss, to deal with. That is the decision of how to handle your pet's remains.

Many pet owners never even think about this issue until their vet suddenly asks, "What do you want to do with the body?" Needless to say, this is *not* the best time to think calmly and rationally about all the options available and arrive at a well-thought-out decision. Unfortunately, this often leads to a hasty decision made at the height of painful emotion—and a decision that one may later regret.

The only alternative is to consider this decision ahead of time. Asking yourself what you want to do with your pet's remains while that pet is still alive and healthy isn't ghoulish. It's a responsible way of facing, and dealing with, a painful reality. It also gives you an opportunity to evaluate all the factors that may be involved in such a decision.

The first factor to consider is your own feelings about death, loss, and remembrance. When you face the death of a pet, your goal will be to preserve the memory of that pet—and your decision should be based on how you think that memory can be best preserved.

Funerals: The Final Farewell

Many people feel that providing a dignified burial or cremation for a pet is a final, fitting act of farewell. They feel that it is the last act of love that they can offer a pet, and it is also, quite often, an important act of closure. Actually being able to view, touch, and say farewell to a pet's body can help one accept that the pet is really dead, that it is not going to come back—and also that it is not suffering in any way. If it is important to you to see that your pet's remains are treated with the same concern and care that you gave your pet during its life, then you should look into home burial, pet cemetery burial, or cremation through a pet crematory. Here's a closer look at these options:

1) Home Burial. Many people choose to bury a pet at home as a way of keeping it close—a part of one's world, even if it isn't a part of one's life. This can also provide a way for you and your family to celebrate a funeral and memorial service, which in themselves can be powerful coping tools. Some pet owners have also reported that their surviving pets seem to understand that their companion is still "present", and report that those pets may spend time visiting the gravesite. Home burial provides the opportunity to create a permanent memorial to one's pet—a grave marker, a statue, or perhaps a tree planted over the pet's grave to serve

as a living memorial. (Others choose to bury a pet under an existing shrub or tree that the pet liked to sleep under.)

In some circumstances, however, home burial may not be an appropriate option. The most obvious is if you have no place in which to bury a pet. You must also be sure that you can dig a deep enough grave to ensure that your pet's remains will not be disturbed or become a health hazard. (Don't bury a pet in a flowerbed that is likely to be redug and replanted.) Many cities prohibit home burials. You also might not wish to bury a pet at home if you rent, or if you are likely to move away from the property.

2) Cremation. If you would still like to keep your pet's remains on your property, but don't have a place to bury an actual body (especially that of a large pet), consider having your pet's remains cremated and returned to you for burial. This still has the advantage of keeping your pet "at home," but bypasses health problems or the concern that the pet's remains might be disturbed later. Or, you can keep the pet's ashes in a decorative urn or container; you'll find a wide range of such products in the classified ads of any pet magazine.

Many pet owners choose to scatter a pet's ashes rather than preserve them. Some choose to scatter the ashes in the pet's own yard, where it lived and played; this is another way of bringing the pet "home" one last time. Others choose to scatter the ashes in a way that symbolizes setting the pet "free" for its final journey—such as in the woods or over a body of water, or just into the wind. Pet crematories can now be found in many cities; a pet crematory can usually pick up your pet's remains from a veterinarian or from your home. Some veterinarians also provide cremation services; some will do so at no extra charge if they have euthanized your pet or if it dies at the vet's office. (Not all veterinarians provide this service, so it might be advisable to check this in advance.)

3) Cemetery Burial. You'll find pet cemeteries in nearly every state; some have literally dozens. For many, a formal cemetery burial seems a more fitting tribute than an informal "backyard burial". Burial in a pet cemetery also ensures that your pet's remains will remain undisturbed, and cared for, "in perpetuity." You will not have to worry about what will happen to your pet if you have to leave the property on which it is buried; it will be cared for, no matter where you go or what happens to you. Cemetery burial can be a costly option, but many find it a comforting, secure way to handle a pet's remains. A pet cemetery will usually be able to pick up your pet from your home or from a veterinarian's office. If you wish, you can make arrangements for a complete funeral and memorial service.

It's the Spirit, Not the Body

While some pet owners feel very strongly about the need to provide a proper resting place for a pet's body, others feel that the body is merely the receptacle for the pet's spirit. When that spirit is gone, many view the body as simply an abandoned shell, with little meaning of its own. Such owners are generally more concerned with preserving the memory of a pet and honoring its spirit and its life, than with fussing over its remains. Some even feel that there's something a bit gruesome about keeping the physical remains of a pet (such as its ashes) around after the pet has "gone." Many also believe that the expense of having a pet formally cremated, or interred in a pet cemetery, would be put to better use providing for the needs of a living pet.

If this describes you, then the question of convenience may play a central role in your decision. If your pet dies or is euthanized at a veterinarian's office, you may prefer to simply allow the vet to dispose of its remains. If your pet dies at home, you may wish to bury it at home not so much out of sentiment, but because it may be simpler than finding someone else

to handle disposal. (Most vets will not charge for the disposal of a pet that dies in the vet's office, but will charge if the pet has died elsewhere.)

If you do not have a location in which to bury a pet, but do not wish to pay any disposal fees, one option is to take your pet to your local humane society. Most humane societies are set up to receive and dispose of animal remains, and most do not charge. Some even have "drop off" bins—though most pet owners regard this as being a bit too much like dumping a pet into the trash.

A Family Decision

Before you make any decision about how to dispose of a pet, make sure that you have considered the feelings and beliefs (and needs) of all family members. You may find that while one family member feels that a pet's body means little after the spirit has gone, another may feel strongly about the need to provide a formal "farewell" in the form of a burial. Conversely, you may find that while some members of the family want a formal burial service, others shudder at the thought of having a grave or "dead body" in the yard.

It is important to realize that there is no *right* or *wrong* viewpoint in such a discussion. One's feelings about death, and about the remains of the dead, are intensely personal—and in a family discussion about how to handle those remains, everyone's feelings should be respected. This is why it is so important to raise this issue and resolve it *before* a pet dies. Otherwise, chances are that one family member (i.e., whoever is present when a pet dies or is euthanized) will have to make a rushed, emotional decision that may not be the decision the rest of the family would have chosen.

It's not easy to talk about a pet's death, or use terms like "remains" and "disposal", while that pet is still alive and very much a part of the family. But avoiding the subject isn't going to prevent the problem from coming up. It's simply going to prevent you from being in a position to handle it effectively when it *does* come up.

It has been said that "funerals are for the living." When a pet dies, you're faced with the need to make a decision that can have a profound impact on how you, and your family, deal with that loss. Don't leave that decision until the last minute.

Author's Note: Since this article was posted, several readers have reminded me to mention that if you choose to leave your pet's body with a veterinarian or humane society for disposal, you may not have a choice in *how* that body is disposed of. If you wish to ensure that your pet is, in fact, cremated, be sure to request this option. If the option is not available, you will need to take your pet's remains elsewhere.

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If you're grieving the loss of a pet, you'll find more helpful tips in Moira Allen's book, *Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet*, available from Amazon.com