

Handout: Laying your pet to rest

Although this can be difficult to think about while you are struggling to come to terms with the fact that your beloved companion animal is coming to the end of their life, it is worth taking a little time to consider how you wish to take care of them after they have died so that you do not have to make decisions in a hurry which might be regretted later on. It also gives everyone involved in the care of your pet the opportunity to discuss what they want so that a collective decision can be made that fits within what is affordable and practical in your particular circumstances. However, should your pet have died without you having had the chance to think about their after-life care, generally vet practices are able to keep small animals for a period of time while you decide.

Leaving it to the vet to dispose of your pet's body

This is the simplest and cheapest option but it means you have no control over how your pet's body will be handled at the licensed facility where animals' remains are processed. If you are considering this simple method you may wish to ask your vet what is involved so that you can be sure that you are comfortable with it before finally deciding.

Cremation

If you opt for communal cremation, where several pets are cremated together, you cannot have your pet's ashes returned:

Cost for communal cremation arranged through your vet practice:

You can ask your vet to arrange an 'individual cremation', which means that the ashes are returned to you to bury in your garden, to scatter in a favourite place you had shared with your pet or to keep in a casket. You will not have to decide what to do with the ashes until you are ready to think about it. However, individual cremation costs more than communal:

Cost for individual cremation arranged through your vet practice:

Alternatively you can contact a private pet crematorium, in which case it is worth checking that the standard of service matches what is advertised, by visiting:

- The Association of Private Pet Cemeteries and Crematoria – for the United Kingdom.
- International Association of Pet Cemeteries and Crematories (IAOPCC) – for across the globe.

Burial of small pets, such as cats, dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs, birds

Laying a beloved pet to rest in the garden is a popular option as it can be a comfort to have their grave so close to hand. If you plan to bury your pet, it is advisable to ask your vet team what is permissible because there are legal restrictions which may apply depending on where you live. For example, in the United Kingdom the law only allows people to bury their pets on land they actually own, such as the garden (unless there are local by-laws against this), and therefore, home burial is not an option for those who rent. Even within the same country there may be different legal requirements and restrictions according to the area. In the United States there are also time restrictions on how quickly the burial must take place.

Something to think about is how you might feel if you move house in the future, because some people have found this to be an issue, as seen in these two brief stories:

An owner explained that one aspect of moving house which upset her was the fact that the grave of their dog was in the garden and she found it really hard to leave it behind. In fact, one day prior to the move, her husband returned home from work to discover her in the garden desperately trying to find the headstone they'd placed on the grave when they buried the dog some years ago. Thankfully her husband had already removed the headstone so they could take it with them to the new house.

Another owner described a similar issue when she unexpectedly had to sell the cottage she shared with her partner because their relationship had broken up and they both had to move home. She said she was devastated at having to leave behind the grave of her beloved cat but there was nothing she could do about it; it still upset her years later.

If you decide on a home burial you can ask your vet team for some practical advice on creating a suitable plot but here are a few useful tips:

- The burial site needs to be a minimum of four feet deep to ensure that there is at least three feet (1 metre) of soil above your pet's body.
- To maintain its integrity place large, flat stones or paving slabs over the grave.
- You can look for a suitably sized box in which to bury a small pet, or obtain a pet coffin made of wood, wicker or thick cardboard, varying in costs, or you can simply wrap your pet's body in a biodegradable cloth.
- The whole family may wish to be involved in preparing the ground and selecting suitable stones or plants to mark your pet's final resting place.

Using a pet cemetery is more expensive than having an animal cremated. However, generally pet cemeteries carry out the hard work of preparing the burial site and provide a well-maintained and peaceful environment in which to visit the pet's grave in the future. Although cemeteries are more scarce, if there is one nearby this option might suit you should you prefer for your pet to be buried but cannot do so yourself for any reason.

Taking care of the remains of an equine

Legislation about burying equines is more complex than for small animals. For example, in the United Kingdom the rules for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are different from those in England. Although it is possible to bury a horse on your own land in England, you need to contact your local council's animal health office. The burial site must be a minimum distance of 50 metres from any well, borehole, or spring supplying water which is used for human consumption or in food production, including private water supplies, and the authorities may require you to mark the burial place on a map to confirm the plot meets this criterion.

You can have a horse cremated – either individually, which allows you to have their ashes returned to you, or communally, where a number of animals are cremated at the same time, which means you cannot have their ashes back. Be aware that it is expensive to have a horse cremated and the crematoria and cemeteries that offer services for equines could be some distance away. Your vet can advise you on what services are available locally:

Details of nearest equine crematorium:

Alternatively, you can choose to use a Fallen Stock organization, which will collect and dispose of the body.

Please remember that you will need to contact the relevant passport-issuing organization to inform them that your equine has died. You may also need to inform your insurers.

Taking care of the remains of farm animals such as sheep, cows, pigs, goats and poultry

Unfortunately, even when a farm animal, other than an equine, was a much-loved pet, government regulations are strict and prevent you choosing how your pet's remains are taken care of. As an example, in the United Kingdom, in normal circumstances you are not allowed to bury a farm animal on your land because they have to be disposed of through official channels, such as a Fallen Stock facility. Clearly, this can be upsetting when they were seen to be a much-valued member of the family, and in these circumstances creating a personalized memorial will at least offer you a point of focus to remember your special companion animal.

Post-mortem

Sometimes a post-mortem is advised by the vet, required by the insurers or occasionally requested by the owner to try to establish the cause of death. If this is the case, ask your vet for advice and guidance, because having a post-mortem may reduce the options as to how you can lay your pet to rest.

Ceremonies and memorials

Pet funerals have become more popular in recent times but if and how you decide to mark your beloved companion animal's end of life is a personal choice and will depend on your own beliefs and what feels right for you. For example, you may want to have a simple ceremony in the privacy of your home or garden; it can be comforting for a family to come together, each to make a mark of respect and remembrance while joining together in mutual grief. Even if you do not have your pet's ashes or remains to bury, having a particular place of remembrance in the garden or another special place can bring comfort in the days that follow.

There are many different ways to create a memorial. For example:

- Online with photos and poems.
- Memory box containing precious mementoes.
- Personalized plaques, stones.
- Framed paw-prints.
- Jewellery containing ashes or pieces of fur or hair.
- Scattering of wildflower seeds with the ashes.
- Pet portrait.
- Photobook.

Of course, you can search online for other memorial ideas. Once your pet has been laid to rest, you can take as much time as you need before deciding on how you may want to remember him or her – there is no rush.