

Choosing a final resting place and memorials

Striving to ensure that our beloved pet's body is respected after death is pivotal. Not only to demonstrate how fundamental and central they were to our lives but to provide us with a sense that even after death, we have honoured their precious body and their life lived and loved through it. Holistically, it can offer some degree of solace at a time of intense sadness and grief.

Most of us will need to decide whether to bury or cremate our pet. For horses, incineration is another option. Much will depend upon our physical environment, financial resources and personal preference. For many, the practicalities of where they live and the cost, will dictate which option to choose.

Burial can take place either at home in the garden or at a pet cemetery. Favourite toys can be buried with the pet. Small animals such as hamsters and birds can be buried in large plant pots too. If space is available, burial at home allows you to remain physically close, especially as many people like to sit quietly next to the grave or 'talk' to their friend, often for many years after the death. However, if you are moving home in the future, you may wish to consider how you will feel in leaving your pet behind. It is not unknown for a pet to be 'moved' and re-buried but this can be extremely distressing in addition to the actual practicalities.

If burial at home is not possible, then burial at a pet cemetery can be arranged either by yourself or veterinary practice. Although not vast in numbers, they can be found throughout the U.K. You will be able to choose a casket. You can visit the cemetery during opening hours and they are normally peaceful, spiritual places with staff experienced in dealing with bereaved animal lovers. However, if the cemetery is a long way away, making regular visits, especially in bad winter weather, may be prohibitive. Also, the land has no legal protection, unlike human cemeteries, and could be put to other uses in the future. It is also the most financially expensive option and normally incurs annual upkeep fees.

Cremation can be either individual or communal. Communal cremation is when more than one animal is cremated at the same time. Individual cremation will be essential if you wish to have your pet's ashes returned to you. The crematoria should be prepared to guarantee that individual cremation means just that. If your vet is arranging individual cremation for you, feel free to check this out with them as they are arranging this service for you. You can normally choose between a basic container, wooden casket or wood/metal urn. The ashes

are then returned to you to be scattered or kept at a special place of your choice, including a pet cemetery. Cremation offers much more flexibility than burial. Some people like to retain the ashes at home. And others instruct their executor that their pet's ashes are to be buried with them on their death.

After burial or cremation, you may wish to erect a memorial such as a headstone, plaque, handmade wooden cross, tree or plant. It is tangible evidence that they have lived and been loved as well as providing comfort to the bereaved owner. It can simultaneously represent the focal point for immediate grief and long term comfort. A memorial can be situated in the garden; within the home; at a pet cemetery or crematorium; the veterinary surgery; animal rescue centre or be internet based. The internet is developing rapidly with many web sites allowing online-plaques; virtual headstones and entries into books of remembrance. Some sites make no charge, others ask for a small contribution. The internet has allowed many more bereaved pet owners to construct a memorial, even though this be virtual, than previously. It is easily accessed and can be shared by family, friends and other bereaved animal lovers. Often, newly bereaved owners who browse these sites find validation in their grief that others share the same feelings. The internet in this respect can show that you are not alone however isolating personal sorrow is. But memorials can be as simple as arranging a collection of photographs and having a keepsake box.

There is a good range of memorials available such as headstones, plaques, caskets and trees/shrubs with widely different costs – from a few pounds for a nice shrub to hundreds of pounds for an elaborate marble headstone. They can be obtained from companies specializing in pet memorials to local carpenters, garden centres, engraving companies and stone workers. Shop around as prices, even for a similar item, can vary. Or make one yourself. Other options include having a tree for charity planted; buying a star and naming it after your pet; or supporting a favourite charity through a gift aid scheme. Some animal charities have a wall of remembrance where bereaved owners can display their plaques. For people who have obtained their pet from an animal rescue charity, this is often a way of thanking the charity for taking care of the animal when it was homeless and to support future work.

Taking careful deliberation in choosing a final resting place can provide peace of mind for many years to come.

Animal bereavement support factsheets are a free resource to help bereaved animal lovers. They must not be interpreted as providing professional counselling or medical advice and no liability or responsibility can be accepted as such. Please consult your G.P for qualified assistance. Thank you.

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