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The other loved ones: Oak Rest owners tend to various needs when families make final arrangements for pets

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Mortician Doyle Shugart can remember when people were almost ashamed of wanting the best for their pets. When animals died, owners asked Shugart to retrieve them for cremation in an unmarked vehicle, so neighbors wouldn't know what was happening.

Those days now seem like a lifetime ago.

At Oak Rest Pet Gardens in eastern Gwinnett County, pet owners can and do buy burial plots and install granite headstones or bronze markers to memorialize their animal's passing. They can purchase decorative urns to take their animal's remains home with them. And they can make "pre-need" arrangements, purchasing family estate plots and specifying the memorial service.

On the business' extensive Web site, customers can browse through various types of memorial urns, view different caskets and decide whether to bury or cremate their pet. They can find bereavement counselors and view photos of the gardens. And they can read testimonials from other customers.

"People have clothes for their pets and insurance," said Keith Shugart, who works in the family-owned business, Deceased Pet Care, with his siblings and their spouses. The cemetery is part of their company.

"More people are choosing to be buried with their pets," he said. "They're acknowledging the bond with their animals."

In the last three years, the Shugarts have expanded their services and facilities to accommodate horses. Theirs is the only business in the Southeast equipped to handle equine needs, according to officials with the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine.

Owners sometimes transport their dead horses to the Harbins Road facility and have them cremated. Or they may hire Deceased Pet Care to pick up the animals and return their remains.

Keith Shugart said horse owners who don't have a farm or a place to bury the remains often choose to have them scattered in Horseshoe Gardens, one of many themed settings in the pet cemetery. Bronze markers or river rocks engraved with the horse's name and dates bear witness to the animal's life.

Those wanting to take home their horse's remains can do so in style. Deceased Pet Care sells decorative equine urns -- boxes of solid cherry or oak, others with nameplates, figurines and slots for photos -- that range from \$215 to \$350.

Horse farm manager George Thomas in Windsor, S.C., said he has hired Deceased Pet Care to handle more than 20 show horses over the past few years. Workers arrive, driving a refrigerated truck, and

retrieve the body. A few days later, the remains arrive in a plastic bag inside a small coffin. Thomas scatters them under the farm's oak trees.

"They're Johnny-on-the-spot coming to pick up the horses," Thomas said, adding that he sends the coffin back to the business. "We appreciate their service. I've recommended them to other horse owners."

Memory gardens in the 10-acre cemetery include the Garden of Companions and the Garden of Angels. During the year, teddy bears, Thanksgiving turkeys, pumpkins and presents may appear on graves. Some headstone inscriptions talk about owners reuniting in heaven with their pets.

"People sometimes ask us to cremate toys, beds or bones with the animal," Keith Shugart said. "They may want paw prints or clippings of fur."

A police flag flies over the Garden of Honor, which is limited to dead law enforcement dogs. Buried there is Rocky, the bomb-sniffing dog that routinely sniffed Air Force One when it landed in Atlanta. Doyle Shugart said burial in the Garden of Honor is free.

In addition to the gardens, Deceased Pet Care plans to create an outdoor urnarium, a wall with panels capable of containing the remains of a pet, or of pets and owners together. Plaques will display names and dates.

"It's going to be a unique system," Keith Shugart said. "There will be a rose garden all around it. It's going to be beautiful."

- ON THE WEB: For more information: www.deceasedpetcare.com

Photo NICK ARROYO / Staff

Keith Shugart of Deceased Pet Care gives a tour of the grounds at Oak Rest Pet Gardens, a pet cemetery in eastern Gwinnett County.

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Customers may select from a number of figurines to adorn the tops of horse urns at Oak Rest Pet Gardens in Dacula.