

Cemetery serves science

Michael Albrecht examines how organic structures will be decomposed in the soil.

The cemetery in Wennigsen is scene of a very unusual kind of experimental series. Thereby decay processes are analyzed in different soils.



Michael Albrecht (big picture, left) and Heiko Steinke are filling the test tubes. In the bag are the horn shavings, whose decomposition is observed. The cemetery soil is interspersed with small wormholes and root channels. The red parts of the soil are contents of iron (small picture).

WENNIGSEN. Michael Albrecht and his employee Heiko Steinke are standing in front of an empty pit. 1.80 meters deep is the hole that was dug in a corner of the cemetery. "At this place, nobody's ever been buried" assured Albrecht, who is member of the cemetery board. Even the expert on burials does not experiment with real bodies.

Albrecht has studied soil science, received his doctorate, is speaker of the association of cemetery managers – and has a research objective: aim is to find out how different soil structures will hinder or enhance the decomposition of organic matter.

For this purpose, he and his employee have filled several plastic tubes with different substrates. Furthermore they have charged nylon stockings with horn shavings and sunk them at different depths of the tubes. After one year, the tubes will be taken out again. Then, it is seen to what extent the horn shavings have decomposed. Already now Albrecht will periodically measure the decomposition gases, which reaches the surface through small tubes.

Many cemetery visitors have already noticed the small weather station which is operated by Albrecht. Measured are precipitation, wind and air pressure. "The data is automatically recorded in the chapel" Albrecht says. His goings-on in the service of science is being observed interested and open-minded.

It is already clear that the synthetic fibers used for several decades, such as the cloth with which the coffin is designed, rot poorly. Several years ago, the cemetery managers had conversations about that nurseries and florists dispense with Styrofoam in the flower arrangements, because this is hazardous waste. Albrecht now hopes to a similar agreement with the undertakers. "This is a real problem" he says.

But in his attempt, it is also about the different types of soil. How behave good "Calenberger" soil in comparison to heavy clay or sandy substrate? In some regions in lower Saxony the decomposition of bodies lasts very long – a problem at an average of 25 years of lying time per grave.

A consequence of the investigation could be that in heavy soils, because of better aeration, the depth of the grave will be reduced.

The experiment is funded by the German Federal Environmental Foundation, and the cemetery in Wennigsen is one of three on which this attempt is made. Albrecht has no reservations regarding the subject of death. "I want to be buried in a coffin" he says.

This article originally appeared in the HAZ-Calenberger Land
27.03.2014 Michael Hemme