

# Country Gardens

SUMMER 2012

## BREAKING GROUND

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All it took was a few hours of hard work, focused weeding, and a truckload of donated plants for the Sharon High School Photography Club (including Rasmia, *top right*, and Thomas, *bottom, far left*) to transform a breast cancer patient's front yard, *top middle* and *bottom left*, into a picture-perfect garden, *top left*. Volunteer Angela, *bottom right*, aims her camera at a newly planted blossom, hoping her photo will be as cover-worthy as the images that grace the note cards, *bottom, far right*, the club sells to benefit Hope in Bloom.

## Hope in Bloom

After the death of her lifelong best friend, a grieving Massachusetts gardener launches Hope in Bloom to plant gardens for breast cancer patients—and one of her prime fund-raisers is a local high school photography club.

**WHEN SHE LOST HER BEST FRIEND** to breast cancer, Roberta Dehman Hershon didn't know what to do with her grief. She and her friend Beverly of Sharon, Massachusetts, had met while jumping rope when Hershon was 7 years old and Beverly was 8, and they had been inseparable from that moment on. When Hershon was in her 30s, she started gardening and Beverly joined her. And when Beverly was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004, Hershon was by her side—bringing her armloads of flowers.

Those flowers made all the difference, Beverly said, keeping her spirits on the bright side. After Beverly's death, "I needed something worthy of honoring her," Hershon says. So she launched Hope in Bloom. The name refers to Lady Bird Johnson's quote "Where flowers bloom, so does hope," and the concept stems from Hershon's certainty that flowers and nature help in the healing process.

The nonprofit organization is dedicated to planting gardens free for anyone—women and men

—in Massachusetts while they are undergoing breast cancer treatment. Hershon works with landscape architects and designers who donate their time to talk with the recipients and their families to learn what they want and can handle, and she rallies volunteers to install the gardens. The recipient receives care instructions to maintain the garden, and, if necessary, volunteers provide initial upkeep. It's an incredibly upbeat service that makes all the difference for dozens of cancer patients who desperately need a green oasis.

The organization's outreach is impressive. Since Hope in Bloom's inception in July 2007, 110 breast cancer patients have received gardens. Depending on the patient's needs, situation, and dreams, the garden might be a small (12x12 feet is typical) but lovely outdoor landscape (often with a water feature), a grouping of patio containers, or an indoor windowsill installation. No matter what the configuration, every plantscape is gorgeous, restful, and green, and imparts the therapeutic power of plants. Each is a place of calm, beauty, and peace where patients can go when they need solace. But the plants are not the only healing factors—the process is also part of the cure. Watching the volunteers rally around also has a positive effect. “They became my allies in the struggle,” a recipient says. “I was no longer alone.”

Attracting volunteers to Hope in Bloom has been easy. However, finding the funds to create the gardens—each outdoor garden costs approximately \$2,000—has been more of a challenge. But the Sharon High School Photography Club and student Erica Greenberg have spread the organization's healing power. Erica resurrected a floundering photography club that morphed into a “cameras for a cause” opportunity. She sparked the club into action to photograph nature, make the photos into note cards, and sell them to benefit Hope in Bloom. “My idea was to take something simple and give it more meaning,” she says. Wherever the club members went, they took photographs. Their skill levels climbed, and they sold thousands of cards. During Erica's years in high school, the group raised \$8,000 for Hope in Bloom. “To see the garden prosper and grow along with the club, and see the recipient heal and become able to care for it—it made us take it to a bigger scale,” Erica says. The club contacted famous photographers to donate their work to be auctioned for the benefit of Hope in Bloom.

So if you're driving around Massachusetts and happen to see a little mob of gardeners wearing purple and green T-shirts with a flower logo close to their hearts and digging away furiously in someone's yard, give them a high five, because they just might be volunteers working with Hope in Bloom. Better still, follow their lead and sign up to work with this organization. You can find out how to volunteer or donate, and cancer patients can download an application to request a garden installation at [hopeinbloom.org](http://hopeinbloom.org).



Denise, a recipient, along with Roberta Dehman Hershon (middle) and Julie, a volunteer.

## How to Create a Healing Garden

It takes a community to create an organization such as Hope in Bloom in Dedham, Massachusetts. Founder Roberta Denham Hershon cast a broad net to pull together the nonprofit. For example, the organization depends on landscape designers who work with breast cancer patients to create gardens that will be meaningful, durable, and healing. Rather than leaning too heavily on a handful of designers, Hershon accesses a group of 75 local landscapers who donate their services. One of the veteran designers is Chris Kennedy of Kennedy's Country Gardens in Scituate, Massachusetts. With six Hope in Bloom gardens to his credit, he has learned the components that work.

- **Ask questions.** Listen to the answers. Have a dialogue with the recipients. An important question to ask is whether gardening is fun for them or a chore. If it's a chore, downsize to fit their lifestyle.
- **Find out what the recipient is willing and able to do.** Don't overburden or stress recipients. Find out whether they have support from family or friends.

If not, put a safety net of volunteers in place to help with maintenance chores after the garden is installed.

- **Talk about favorites.** Don't make assumptions about what plants are best for the recipient. Find out what the recipient needs in their life now.

- **Plant for instant gratification.** New garden installations are often a leap of faith: They will grow to become wonderful eventually. This garden must look incredibly wonderful and uplifting right now.

- **Plant for multiseason interest.** Because cancer patients need cheering throughout the growing season, be sure to include annuals that will perform during summer lulls when perennials are rejuvenating. And select perennials for spring, midsummer, and later in the season.

- **Include the recipient as an observer.** Make sure the recipient knows you don't expect them to join in with the digging and heavy lifting of garden installation—that's what the volunteers are there for. But welcome the patient's presence.

- **Remember follow-up.** Care directions are critical, and it's wise to give patients a printed sheet with instructions for easy reference. Kennedy leaves his phone number with the promise that he's just a phone call away if the recipient has questions.