

The HAVERHILL GAZETTE

WWW.HAVERHILLGAZETTE.COM

AUGUST 13, 2009

Planting hope



Volunteers including Peter Devereaux of North Andover, in photo bottom left, turned blank patches of yard at the home of breast cancer patient Lisa Connolly into beautiful gardens with the help of garden designer Charlene Maunsell of Potscapes in Georgetown, right who also volunteered her time. The pocket garden above is what now fills the patch that Devereaux is shown tilling.

A gift that grows

BY CARA SPILSBURY
cspilsbury@haverhillgazette.com

As Lisa Connolly of Bradford lay in bed, exhausted from her latest treatment for breast cancer, a busy brigade of volunteers worked to create the backyard oasis of her dreams.

The workers came as part of Hope in Bloom, a nonprofit organization that provides indoor or outdoor gardens at no charge to anyone in Massachusetts battling breast cancer.

Landscape designer Charleen Maunsell, owner of Potscapes in Georgetown, arrived at Connolly's Rainbow Drive home at 8:30 a.m., armed with a shovels, bulbs, mulch, flowers, shrubs and an army of volunteers.

"I love landscape design," said Maunsell, who does all her work for Hope in Bloom at no charge. "But when you get to do it for someone not feeling well, for someone who is sick, there is a different level of gratification there."

By 3 p.m., a new backyard had emerged. In one corner stood an arbor with a bird bath, hanging plants and a bevy of plants with different colors and textures. Along the fence, the gardeners placed a lineup of seedlings. Next to the deck, a garden with three-season interest was installed, with each plant providing color at different times of the year. At the entrance to the backyard, three annabelle hydrangeas with white flowers, Connolly's favorite plants, now welcome visitors.

Connolly, 47, has been battling this round of breast cancer for a year and a half. She was diagnosed in January 2008, almost four years to the date in 2004 when she was diagnosed the first time. The second time the disease reared its ugly head, it came back worse than before.

"She had her seventh chemo treatment Monday," said her husband, Bob Connolly.

Hope blooms

Hope in Bloom was founded by Roberta Dehman Hershon, who grew up in Sharon and now lives in Dedham. When her best friend, Beverly Eisenberg, was battling breast cancer, Dehman Hershon couldn't singlehandedly cure the disease. But she realized that she could bring joy to her friend's day with another form of healing. She continued gardening, the pair's favorite hobby.

"I started to bring her beautiful bouquets in the winter and I worked on her garden in the spring, and I noticed how much she appreciated that," Dehman Hershon said. "She was always in a much better mood."

With lifted spirits, Eisenberg fought off the disease after being diagnosed with Stage 4 metastatic breast cancer in the fall of 2004. But in August 2005, Dehman Hershon lost her beloved friend.

Two years later, Dehman Hershon decided to use her love of gardening to help ease the pain of breast cancer for as many people as possible. In July 2007, she founded Hope in Bloom.

The name was inspired by Lady Bird Johnson's famous quotation: "*Where flowers bloom, so does hope.*"



Volunteers planted white hydrangea, Lisa Connolly's favorite flower.

The power of plants

Peter Devereaux of North Andover was happy to help make Lisa Connolly's dream garden a reality. He is not only a volunteer with Hope in Bloom, but he's a breast cancer patient himself.

"I used to be a landscaper, but I haven't been doing a lot of that lately," he said. "When I found out about this group, it seemed like a perfect fit."

Devereaux has seen first hand what the power of a garden can do. Something as simple as a serene corner in someone's yard can have countless therapeutic effects.

"For patients, it's phenomenal," he said. "Who doesn't love to see beautiful things?"

According to Dehman Hershon, gardens can do more than please the eye. She said there is research that proves gardening also releases serotonin, reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, reduces anxiety.

"A garden can be a very simple thing, but it makes a huge difference," she said.

A simple start

As Bob Connolly waited with his wife, Lisa, at Beth Israel Hospital after a recent round of chemo, the couple perused a wall of informational pamphlets. Many involved counseling and support groups. But one in particular, a bright card with pink and white flowers, caught their eye.

After reading about Hope in Bloom, Bob called for more information. Before he knew

it, landscaper Maunsell came to meet with the family and hear about what Lisa dreamed of in her backyard. Two weeks later, the project was underway.

"This is so much better than I expected," Bob Connolly said,

He said he could envision the couple's three daughters enjoying the new space. But he was certain no one would be more moved than his wife, who loves to sit and watch the girls play in the yard and pool.

"She'll probably start crying when she sees this," he said, scanning and rescanning their made-over backyard.

Spreading seeds

Lisa Connolly's backyard garden was the 71st project completed by Hope in Bloom and the first in Haverhill.

More than 100 gardens are waiting in the wings for the Hope in Bloom volunteers. Their goal is to grow their organization countrywide.

The gardens are executed entirely by people donating their time to the cause. Those wishing to volunteer don't need a landscaping background either, just an interest in gardening, a willingness to get dirty, and the enthusiasm to learn.

The projects are funded entirely by private donations. According to Dehman Hershon, an indoor potted garden can run \$400 to \$600, an outdoor patio potted garden can cost \$800 to \$1,500 and an in-ground outdoor garden can cost \$1,000 to \$3,000.

The gardens are designed to fit the desires and needs of the patients, to accommodate their favorite colors and flowers or to highlight a favorite part of their yard. They are also designed for minimal upkeep. The last thing the volunteers want to do is give a breast cancer patient something extra to worry about.

"Our goal is as little maintenance as possible," said Maunsell. "We make careful selections. Right plant, right place."

After a garden is complete, the volunteers spend time teaching the recipient or their family members how to maintain the garden. Most often, all that is needed is proper watering.

For more information about Hope in Bloom, including how to request a garden, how to volunteer and how to donate, visit www.hopeinbloom.org.