

HOPE *in* BLOOM

Breast cancer survivors and their families in Massachusetts benefit from an organization dedicated to creating garden sanctuaries.

BY DIANA PRICE

Roberta Hershon and her friend Beverly Eisenberg spent many wonderful hours together immersed in their Massachusetts gardens—planning, visiting nurseries, and working together in the dirt. When Beverly was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004, her close circle of friends made sure that her garden was cared for, and, when she was unable to enjoy the outdoors, they ensured that she was still surrounded by the flowers and the green growing things that brought her so much joy and peace.



SPIRIT HOUSE Tending to the Soul



When Beverly died in 2005, Roberta was inspired by the way the garden and the plants her friends had maintained had continued to bolster Beverly's spirit throughout her illness. In Beverly's honor Roberta founded Hope in Bloom, a not-for-profit organization created to provide indoor and outdoor gardens free of charge at the homes of Massachusetts women and men undergoing treatment for breast cancer. The first 24 gardens were planted in the summer of 2007, and the organization currently has more than 100 qualified requests for gardens from around the state. It's clear that for many survivors and their caregivers, a garden sanctuary is powerful medicine.

For Roberta the opportunity to provide a garden space for survivors has been an affirming and wonderful experience. "Just like a diagnosis of cancer changes someone's life forever, Hope in Bloom has changed mine. Every time we install a garden and I see the joy on a recipient's face and later learn about how spending time in their garden has granted them inner strength to beat cancer, I know we are making a difference."

The scale of the Hope in Bloom requests varies, Roberta says, and past projects have included everything from filling indoor spaces with lush tropical plants, to creating fragrant retreats on apartment balconies and small patios, to engaging in full-scale renovations of outdoor gardens. In one case the organization transformed an overgrown patch of lawn at a rental property into a bird-and-butterfly garden for an avid birder. The survivor, Roberta says, now spends hours watching the many birds who visit the birdbath. At another home the owner told volunteers that her garden "looked as sick and tired as she felt." She didn't have the money to take care of it, but she wanted to revive the space. After volunteers spent days pruning, raking, and planting colorful flowers, Roberta says, the owner told Roberta that there were no words to describe her emotional high: just being able to sit in her garden every morning made her stronger.

Whatever the request, Roberta says, the organization — working with landscape designers and nurseries that donate their time and expertise (Hope in Bloom generally covers the cost of the plants) — works closely with clients to ensure that the results meet their needs and their caretaking abilities. Because the organization provides many gardens for clients from underserved populations, including single women, single mothers, and seniors, it's especially important to ensure that the garden will not result in any undue burden. "We meet with clients to see what kind of gardening experience they have and how much time can be devoted to upkeep. It's important that the end result is a garden

Opposite page, clockwise from upper left: Volunteers at survivor Beth Anderson's house; Beth Anderson sitting in her new garden; survivor Susan Farmer working in her garden; Volunteers at Susan Farmer's house

our clients will enjoy." In addition, the team takes into consideration special requests for colors or fragrances, specific plant varieties, memories that a client might wish to evoke, and any other specific information that will make the garden a truly special environment.

The impact that these gardens have made on the lives of breast cancer survivors is remarkable. "A Hope in Bloom garden provides beautiful surroundings for people to focus on and take their minds off their illness," Roberta says.

For many the garden becomes a powerful image of the positive way their own body and spirit can continue to flourish. "My garden is a symbol of my personal survival," says Sue Gieraj. "The doctors saved my life, while my Hope in Bloom garden rejuvenated my spirit. Each healthy new blossom I see this year fills me with positive energy that keeps me strong."

The response from survivors, the devotion of the many volunteers and businesses who make the gardens a reality, and the knowledge that she is able to continue to honor Beverly's memory make Roberta's work with Hope in Bloom an intensely rewarding endeavor. In describing the cumulative effect of watching the gardens inspire inner flowering in the lives of survivors and their families, Roberta refers to a quote from designer Charleen Maunsell, who has contributed her time to the organization: "It's all so magical yet so simple."

For more information about Hope in Bloom, visit www.hopeinbloom.org

