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Tina Vitale of Andover hugs her friend, Elissa Iwanicki, as she arrives to plant a vegetable and flower garden for Vitale, who was diagnosed with breast cancer.

IN FULL BLOOM

Group plants garden to boost cancer patient's spirits

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ANDOVER — To see Tina Vitale, an energetic mother of two young boys, one would never guess she has been battling breast cancer.

"If it wasn't for the scans, I wouldn't even know I was sick," she joked.

Vitale was full of spirit yesterday as she greeted friends and relatives. They had come to help plant at her home an organic garden with oregano, spinach, spearmint, marigolds, tomatoes, sunflowers, lettuce, dill and basil in conjunction with Hope in Bloom, a nonprofit organization that designs free of charge gardens for Massachusetts residents with breast cancer.

Studies show that these gardens make the patient more receptive to treatment by lifting their spirits, lowering their blood pressure and alleviating anxiety, said Roberta Hershon, the founder of Hope in Bloom.

"The gardens don't cure you. They put you in a better state for treatment," she said.

Vitale, 38, was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer in June 2008 after going to the doctor for treatment of a ruptured cyst. Upon hearing the news, she immediately thought of her two sons, Jason, 9, and Zachary, 7.



From left, Patty Spring, Charleen Maunsell and Jason Vitale plant a tomato plant in a vegetable and flower garden for Jason's mom, Tina Vitale, who was diagnosed with breast cancer. The crew was working with Hope in Bloom, a nonprofit that improves the quality of life for breast cancer patients in Massachusetts.



From left: Kate Wagner, Nicole Dalbec-Joyal, Elissa Iwanicki, Carolyn Kendrigan, Evelyn Kantas and Tricia Misage plant a vegetable and flower garden for Tina Vitale who was diagnosed with breast cancer. The garden was planted through the help of Hope in Bloom, a nonprofit that improves the quality of life for breast cancer patients in Massachusetts by planting gardens at their homes free of charge.

She didn't want the overwhelming side effects of traditional cancer treatment to cripple her.

"I wanted to be able to function and put my kids on the bus," Vitale said.

To do so, she has been undergoing alternative treatment, which includes vaccines and vitamins to strengthen the immune system and fight her tumors, and supplementing it with small doses of chemotherapy.

Surrounded by loved ones in sweat-stained T-shirts and dirty gardening gloves, but with huge smiles, Vitale said the support she received has been tremendous.

When Vitale spent eight weeks in Mexico for treatment, her husband, John, rarely had to cook because her relatives took turns bringing them meals and taking the kids for the weekend.

They came out in full force once again for Hope in Bloom, which has planted 71 gardens with the help of 650 volunteers.

Inspired by former first lady Lady Bird Johnson's promise "Where flowers bloom, there is hope," Hope in Bloom planted its first garden on July 11, 2007, the day she died.

Hershon founded the organization after losing a close friend to breast cancer. Hershon and Beverly Eisenberg jump-roped together at the age of 7 and were inseparable until Eisenberg's death in August 2005.

"We were supposed to grow old together. Nobody was supposed to die," Hershon said.

Hershon said Eisenberg had a fabulous outlook on life, an amazing laugh and a love for gardening, which they shared. During the summer, Eisenberg would see the flower garden and think up all sorts of ways to fix it up.

"She would say, 'Next year, we'll move that over there and change this and that,'" Hershon said.

Although Eisenberg didn't make it to next year, the goal of Hope in Bloom is to give people such as Vitale a chance to live to see these flowers and vegetables grow year after year.



Jay Hart left, and Nick Coufas dig post holes for a fence that will surround a vegetable garden for Tina Vitale.