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## In backyard vegetable garden, peace for cancer patients

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On a recent day in Cohasset, fog blanketed the town, but it could not cloud the mood in one backyard, which was bustling with excitement and anticipation.

Jean O'Halloran and her family waited for the arrival of a gift in unlikely packaging: a new vegetable garden for their home.

"I can't believe it's finally coming. I'm so excited for my garden," the 33-year-old mother of two said out loud to the handful of people scrambling around her yard helping with the installation.

The helpers are volunteers from an organization called Hope in Bloom, a Dedham-based nonprofit that builds gardens for those undergoing treatment for breast cancer, using labor and ingredients donated by well-wishers.

"What we do is we offer [patients] some peace and put a little bit of color back into their life," said Roberta Hershon, the organization's founder.

Hershon started Hope in Bloom in 2007, an idea that sprouted from her secondhand experience with the disease. A lifelong friend was diagnosed with breast cancer in October 2004, and gardening had become her way of helping and caring for this friend.

"What I could do was make sure she always had flowers in



**Jean O'Halloran with daughter Abby and son Sean, in the backyard.**

her house, and I took care of her garden," Hershon said. "It allowed her to be receptive to treatment."

The following August, less than a year after being diagnosed, the friend died. Hershon was inspired with the idea that would become Hope in Bloom.

"Gardens have their own special brand of medicine, and they do things that doctors can't do," she said recently.

Her organization is privately funded and made up of about 650 volunteers. They plant

indoor gardens year-round and patio and outdoor gardens seasonally. Such a project would cost as much as \$3,000, but is free to the recipient. People can sign themselves up for a garden or nominate others; they just need a doctor's note verifying breast cancer treatment.

"We like to give them something to look forward to when they come home from their treatment," said Chris Kennedy, owner of Kennedy's Country Gardens in Scituate,

who is involved with the group. "What I like to think of is, something positive comes out of something negative."

In late July, just two years after it began, Hope in Bloom planted its 71st garden in O'Halloran's backyard. It was one of two gardens donated by Kennedy, the other for O'Halloran's mother, Joanne Hopkinson, who got her garden on Aug. 11. O'Halloran's was the first vegetable garden planted by the organization.

"It's something I've always



**Hope in Bloom volunteer Michele Tasiopoulos worked in the garden. The Dedham-based nonprofit plants gardens for those undergoing treatment for breast cancer.**

wanted to try,” O’Halloran said of growing her own vegetables. “We don’t know why I got cancer. I feel it would give me peace of mind to know where my food is coming from.”

She learned of her disease in August 2008, less than a year after her mother was diagnosed. It’s not genetic, according to medical tests.

O’Halloran was the first of the two to receive her garden, but it was her mother who was the real motive behind the installations. O’Halloran had picked up a Hope in Bloom advertisement and looked into it for her mother, who loves to garden. When she called to nominate her mother, the organization offered one to her as well after learning she was also being treated.

“She’s the green thumb in the family; I’m just learning,” O’Halloran said about her mother, who lives in Weymouth. “I’m so glad that I found something to keep her spirits up a little bit.”

Hopkinson, a gardener for years, said she particularly enjoyed her hobby while going through treatment. “It was something to divert my mind from what was



**Jean O’Halloran and her 4-year-old son, Sean, checked out a tomato taken from their new vegetable gardens donated by Hope in Bloom.**

going on inside me,” she said. “It’s a kind of therapy.”

Both O’Halloran and her mother have undergone rigorous treatments and are now in followup care.

Their gardens are providing them with some sense of calm and serenity, and, for O’Halloran, perhaps something more.

“I’m hoping that if my kids help me, they’ll get excited about vegetables, too,” she said.