

# Hope in Bloom

## Healing gardens comfort and uplift cancer patients

By Julia Quinn-Szcesuil

**ROBERTA HERSHON**, 62, pulls on her work gloves, grabs her favorite pair of red shears, and frets over late-arriving lilac bushes and hostas while preparing to plant a garden for Mary Ellen Whyte, 65, in Waltham, Mass. (pop. 60,632).

The founder of Hope in Bloom, which creates gardens free of charge for people battling breast cancer, Hershon is a whirlwind of activity while coordinating a small army of volunteers digging into Whyte's backyard. Turning to Whyte, however, she is calm and focused amid the flurry of shovels, rakes and potted plants.

"I am so glad you are getting your garden," she says to Whyte, who responds with a smile and a nod.

Both women know the patio garden is about more than fragrant flowers and a pretty water fountain. It is about planting seeds of hope—both for the present and the future.

"Plants provide their own special brand of medicine no one can give you," says Hershon, gesturing to the small oasis in progress.

Planted last spring, Whyte's became the



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Roberta Hershon (above) plants free gardens in Massachusetts for people battling breast cancer to honor her friend Beverly Eisenberg (left), who died of breast cancer in 2005.



119th garden created by Hope in Bloom since Hershon founded the nonprofit organization in 2005 in Dedham, Mass. (pop. 24,729). With the help of volunteers and donations, the group provides tranquil blooming spaces so breast cancer patients in Massachusetts can enjoy a respite from the sterile grind of hospitals, treatments and medication.

The mission was inspired after Hershon's lifelong friend, Beverly Eisenberg, died of breast cancer in 2005. The two women loved to dig in their gardens, and Eisenberg enjoyed the quiet beauty of plants and flowers. Hope in Bloom became a natural way to honor Eisenberg and their bond.

"I think what the gardens do is it keeps her alive for me," Hershon says. "Beverly was the type of person who thought the glass was not only half full, but three-quarters full. She was the friend everyone wanted to have and everyone wanted to be. I miss her every day."

Whyte was in the midst of treatments in May when Hershon and her crew arrived to plant three seasons of flowers and install a bubbling fountain—all designed by A Yard and a Half Landscaping of Waltham.

"Thinking of that garden was so uplifting," says Whyte, who in March lost her husband to cancer. "I can come out here and just relax. This will be a place just for me."

Breast cancer survivor Rebecca Byrne, 38, continues to enjoy the garden planted in her backyard in 2011 while she was undergoing chemotherapy and caring for a baby. She recalls how, amid treatment schedules and hospital bills and the challenges of being a new mom, she found solace among purple and white irises, pink cone-flowers and purple salvia. "It was the perfect escape," Byrne says.

While the waiting list for gardens has grown as word has spread about Hope in Bloom, Hershon is determined to nurture as many patients and plants as possible. Her personal passion and commitment—to share with others the same comfort that her friend found in gardens—inspires volunteers, designers, suppliers and donors to help.

"There are so many people who like Roberta," says volunteer Brenda Lutfy, 64, resting her hands on a shovel during a planting. "She inspires loyalty."

If needed, volunteers return to recipients' gardens during the first season to weed, prune and water. However, each garden is designed for easy care. "The goal," Hershon says, "is to make this joyful and not a burden."

Hershon hopes the green spaces serve as a constant source of comfort, strength and hope, long after the cancer is gone.

"I think that is what everyone grabs on to—hope," Hershon says. "Hope that there is a better day around the corner." ★



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Volunteers with Hope in Bloom help Hershon plant a backyard garden last spring in Waltham, Mass.