

A gardener's life

Patty Cassidy's career path led her from teaching school to working in horticultural therapy to writing a book on gardening for seniors

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Google changed the course of Patty Cassidy's gardening life, not once but twice. The first search led to a career in horticultural therapy, a complete departure from unsatisfying years as a high school counselor.

The second Google search landed her a book contract out of the blue from a British publisher. The result was "The Illustrated Practical Guide to Gardening for Seniors."

Cassidy "couldn't put my finger on why I wasn't satisfied with counseling. I was always looking to bring nature to the students, go for walks outside, fill my office with plants," she says.

She struggled with her career until her 14-year-old niece, born with cystic fibrosis, was awaiting a lung transplant.

For those five stressful days, Cassidy gardened from dawn to dusk. Her niece "didn't even get to California for the transplant. She died. I Googled 'healing gardens.' If there wasn't such a thing, I was going to start one."

The first name that popped up was Portlander Teresa Hazen, nationally known horticultural therapy teacher and pioneer, with news of a September class. Cassidy had missed the deadline but called immediately, got an interview and took a cancellation slot. Her life had just taken a sharp turn into full-time gardening.

"Patty was a special jewel," Hazen says. "She was a mature student who took charge" of her training.

Today Cassidy, 63, tends four Legacy Health healing gardens on the Good Samaritan campus, including the Kern ICU rooftop garden where all the patients look

out over raised beds, water features, climbing clematis, benches and visiting birds.

She also developed a consulting business and works with frail elders with failing memories at Providence Elder Place. "They remember being gardeners, but they can't get out," she says.

Last month Cassidy brought flowers from her garden, and patients shared memories of their mothers, of May Day, of fields where they collected flowers. "They were enjoying each other's company, not just sitting or watching television."

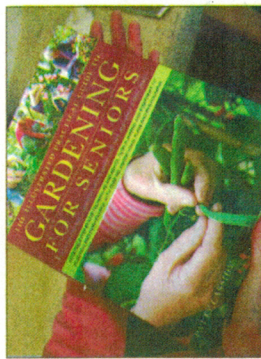
Cassidy's total immersion into her new life led to a term as board member of the American Horticultural Therapy Association. She is also president of the Friends of Portland Memory Garden, professionally designed for dementia patients and their caregivers. Hazen describes Cassidy as the force behind the Memory Garden's 10-year anniversary celebration June 2-3.

The second twist in Cassidy's story was also set in motion by Google. She had written two newsletter articles about gardening with elders. Her boss received an email from editor Emma Clegg at Anness Publishing in Britain, who had Googled "senior gardening." Patty Cassidy's articles popped up, discussions ensued, a contract was signed, and the book was published last fall.

Serendipity (and the Internet) gave Cassidy the great gift of a life congruent with both her counseling skills and passion for gardening.

"I wish I'd discovered this 20 years ago. But that's OK," she says.

For the elders whose lives she has enriched and the seniors who will continue to garden indefinitely thanks to Cassidy's book, "that's OK."



Patty Cassidy has written a gardening book for seniors.

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Cassidy grew up on Long Island, N.Y., and moved to Portland from Boston in 1979 with her husband. A former elementary teacher and high school counselor, she became certified as a horticultural therapist in 2003.



Cassidy's husband bought her these garden clogs (they're Birkenstocks).



(LEFT) Cassidy leads members of the Portland Garden Club in a work party at the Portland Memory Garden in May. Cassidy is president of the garden in Southeast Portland, created for people with memory disorders.

PORTLAND MEMORY GARDEN OPEN HOUSE

What: A free event celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Portland Memory Garden, designed to meet the needs of people with memory disorders.

When: Sunday, June 3, noon to 4 p.m.

Where: Portland Memory Garden, Southeast Powell Boulevard at 104th Avenue.

Activities: Guided tours, free nature crafts, live music, door prizes, refreshments and a ribbon cutting for the new community garden.

Online info: www.portlandmemorygarden.org

PATTY CASSIDY'S BOOK

Title: "The Illustrated Practical Guide to Gardening for Seniors: How to Maintain a Beautiful Outside Space With Ease and Safety in Later Years."

Description: Hands-on coverage of how senior gardeners can keep gardening indefinitely.

Highlights:

- Staying put? Downsizing? Moving to community living? Issues to consider.
- Dealing with safety and declining physical abilities.
- Time-tested ergonomic tools and adaptations.
- Low-maintenance plant directory.