

# Your personal trainer

Aspiring gardeners –  
or even experienced ones  
– turn to coaches to  
grow their skills

By Lisa Russo

SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

**W**hen Amy Pearson purchased her Northeast Portland home three years ago, she marveled at the beautiful garden that came with it.

And then it started to grow.

"I got intimidated," says Pearson, a graduate student in public administration with little gardening experience.

She hired a landscape service to maintain the garden, but it was expensive and she didn't like that she wasn't involved and wasn't learning anything. Pearson knew she wanted more than just a beautiful garden: She wanted to be a gardener.

Gardening can be overwhelming, particularly in the Pacific Northwest with its abundance of sophisticated landscapes, savvy gardeners and available plant varieties. It's easy for people to be inspired by the artistry that abounds, but not always easy to make it happen. Even a trip to the local nursery can send a novice into a panic.

Some of those aspiring gardeners, like Pearson, are turning to garden coaches to grow their skills. These so-called coaches might have training in horticulture, garden design or landscape architecture, but they're also teachers who enjoy passing along the love of digging in the dirt.

Pearson eventually called it quits with her gardening service and advertised online for a mentor. Tim Batog, a landscape architecture graduate who tends to rely as much on his horticulture skills as he does his design skills, was one of many who responded.

Since then the two have been meeting weekly for lessons in gardening and tackling whatever needs to be done in Pearson's yard.

They revamped the perennial bed by moving plants around and adding new plants in a way that would give the garden a cohesive feel. Over time Pearson has developed her feel for gardening and now can make it her own.

"One thing that's been really fun for me is watching her develop her taste," says Batog. Pearson admits that at first she wouldn't sacrifice any plants for the sake of



Each week, Tim Batog coaches Amy Pearson, who has gradually learned

PHOTOS BY MARY BONDAROWICZ/THE OREGONIAN



LEFT: The pond in the southeast corner of the property is one of the features Pearson decided to keep when she started working with Batog. BELOW: The silver-green leaves of *Parahebe perfoliata* add to the garden even when the lavender-blue flowers die off.

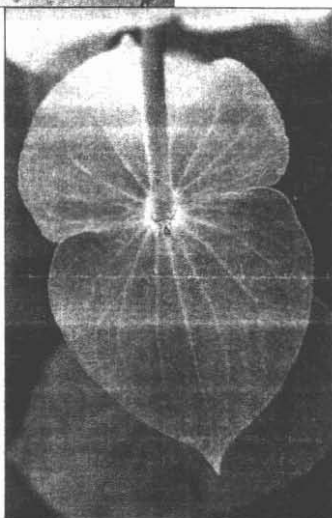
a refined plant combination, and now she's a bit more discriminating.

But Batog says each of his clients is different. Some are novice gardeners looking for basic instruction, while more experienced clients are looking for some imposed discipline or a fresh eye. "One of my clients knows a lot about plants and she loves them — and she tends to cram things in," says Batog, who considers himself a sort of personal trainer in the gardening world. "So my job is to rein her in."

Coach Lucinda Packard also understands the need for support in the garden. "I sometimes call myself a garden therapist," she says.

Packard is a designer who does more than hand over a design to her clients. She sees several clients on an ongoing basis to give them guidance through the seasons. She instructs them on how to take care of specific plants, how to add structure and combine

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Golden heather contrasts with a rich, red-leaved *Phormium tenax*.

suppliers who have what her clients need for hardscaping.

"I educate people and give them the confidence to garden," she says. "It's supposed to be fun."

Debbie Tolman teaches her clients about the big picture of gardening in her role as designer and coach. A teacher who is trained as a geographer and environmental scientist, Tolman encourages people to think about how their garden will evolve over time and how it sits in the larger landscape.

"I'm trying to teach people how to do sustainable gardens," says Tolman, who wants to help her clients to understand natural systems and to integrate natural cycles into the planning of their garden.

Tolman emphasizes that gardens are dynamic and so is the process of creating and maintaining one. That's why she considers herself on-call for questions.

"People can call me anytime," she says, recognizing that the need for coaching can arise at any moment in the garden. "Once I had a client call and ask, 'How do we move a huge rock?' and I tell them, 'You do it like the Egyptians did: You roll it.'"

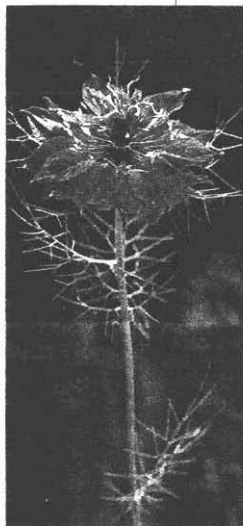
Many new gardeners would love a step-by-step "how-to" manual, but of course gardening is more of a trial-and-error art

than a paint-by-numbers experience.

Coaches offer a variety of services that include helping with maintenance, visiting nurseries with their clients, and strengthening the clients' relationship with their gardens through long-term planning. They also encourage people to be stewards of the land, to understand the level of care that's required, and to discover the joy in gardening.

With the help of her coach, Amy Pearson is gaining the confidence to enjoy and maintain the beauty of her garden. "Tim's got me to understand that plants are fascinating. . . . It's not just about flowers, it's about the scents and the texture of the foliage and the way they grow. . . . I've learned so much." ♦

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Pearson used to hire a gardening service to maintain her yard. Today she enjoys doing the work in her garden, which has a wide variety of interesting plants, including *Nigella damascena* (above) and lambs' ears (*Stachys byzantina*, below), which Pearson prefers for its foliage, not its flowers, which she clips.



## myself a garden therapist."

LUCINDA PACKARD, garden coach

### Finding a garden coach

Just as gardening is part art and part science, so is finding someone to act as your garden coach or mentor.

Some start looking close to home: A more experienced friend or relative might be willing to spend time helping you get started.

But hiring someone to teach you while also helping develop your garden is an emerging trend not yet formalized by ads in the Yellow Pages, job descriptions or established fees.

Garden coaches generally tailor their service to suit the specific needs of the client and typically charge between \$30 and \$65 an hour for one-on-one time and a flat rate for a design. You can negotiate whether you want seasonal coaching or a weekly workout.

Often coaches are people trained in garden design, horticulture or some other specialty. But they are also teachers who want to share their love of gardening. So, you can ask around for someone with those credentials, put out a help-wanted notice online or on community bulletin boards, or your local nursery.

You can reach the three coaches interviewed for this story at these numbers: Tim Batog, 971-570-2174; Lucinda Packard, 503-254-4089; and Debbie Tolman, Avanti Gardens, NW, 503-287-7980.



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