

An Enduring Gift of Gardening

David Dye, 77, a multiple myeloma survivor who lives in Troy, Alabama, was intrigued by an offer to be part of a Harvest for Health study. Now he's training to be a master gardener.

June 15, 2020 By O. David Dye

If there is a silver lining to my experience with cancer, it's Harvest for Health. Who knew growing turnip greens and okra would be so healing?

I was diagnosed in 2014. I was 71. One morning, I noticed a scaly rash on my chest; that day, I experienced extreme fatigue. Blood work and a biopsy led to an unsettling diagnosis full of dread, fear and uncertainty: multiple myeloma, a treatable but not curable disease.

Treatment was grueling—months of chemotherapy, then a bone marrow transplant. When I returned home, I could walk only a fraction of a mile without rest. Remission lasted a while, but soon the myeloma returned. So I started on a clinical trial of two oral drugs and an infusion that took place over 18 four-week cycles. I was released with a “deep” remission.

Like so many families affected by cancer, my wife and I were the recipients of many blessings—from doctors, nurses, church members, friends, family. But one blessing was unexpected. The University of Alabama at Birmingham invited me to participate in Harvest for Health, an “at-home gardening intervention for cancer survivors over 65” funded by the National Cancer Institute to determine whether gardening could boost exercise and nutrition. Participants received \$500 worth of gardening supplies.

I was all in. When I was a kid, I watched my grandmother and aunts on the front porch of their farmhouse, shelling butter beans, snapping string beans and peeling apples for canning. Years later, my wife and I planted corn behind our first house, and when our kids were little, we dabbled with growing squash, tomatoes and okra. But 30 years had passed.

I left the orientation session with a soaker hose, gardening tools, a watering can, plant food, garden gloves, three bags of seeds and insect-killing soap. Soon a raised garden bed form and soil were delivered. I met my mentor, a volunteer who is a certified master gardener.

I learned to mix the soil “like you’re baking a cake and not lasagna,” fight deer with a fence and deter flea beetles and cutworms with neem oil and diatomaceous earth. My first crop included broccoli, spring onions, sugar snap peas, cabbage and a variety of greens. My wife cooked turnip greens in chicken broth and prepared corn bread muffins and cabbage slaw. “This is so good you’ll

have to continue planting greens,” she told me. Now I’m also growing okra, butter beans, rattlesnake pole beans and squash.

Gardening gave me exercise and fresh air, but also purpose, the satisfaction of developing new skills and producing something valuable. I enjoyed the partnership with my mentor and the sense of community. I felt great pleasure participating in a project that could benefit other cancer survivors. There were more benefits than I could have ever imagined.

I enjoyed the gardening project so much that I didn’t want it to end. And in a sense, it hasn’t. After I expressed interest in continuing to learn and garden, Harvest for Health offered me a partial scholarship to enroll in a local master gardeners class. Gardening is a gift that truly keeps on giving.

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<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/enduring-gift-gardening-o-david-dye>