

GARDEN COACHES

Your garden's personal trainer

By Kathy Jentz

You have a yard full of weeds that desperately need taming, but no idea how to accomplish that. You can't afford a high-priced landscape designer and besides, why let them have all the fun? You want to get your hands dirty and learn a new skill in the process. Whether you are new to gardening, new to the mid-Atlantic gardening climate, or just feeling overwhelmed, a garden coach is a great starting place.

Susan Harris, a garden coach based in Takoma Park, says, "People are often overwhelmed when they first start a garden or begin trying to take care of the garden that came with their new home. I help them prioritize, then organize and implement the work that needs to be done to achieve their goal. It's hand-holding, teaching, guidance, encouragement and hands-in-the-dirt instruction."

"Coaching is for anyone, except for those who aren't willing to do things differently. If you don't change your habits, you'll get the same result," says garden coach Rebecca P. Cohen of Rebecca Plants LLC in Tysons Corner. She adds, "Coaching

clients want to learn! They're tired of not knowing what to do in a certain area, and they're brave enough to ask for help."

Cohen sees her role as a garden coach, "to get people more comfortable taking care of their garden, whether planning, planting or doing routine maintenance. It's about helping people realize how much they can do, be confident and enjoy the process of gardening more, versus simply expecting an outcome. When you only focus on the way you want things to be, but don't know how to execute them, people get overwhelmed, and most times they don't even start or plants die.

"I think an element of coaching is important in any project to set up the client for success," Cohen comments. "A do-it-yourself client may want 100 percent coaching or to learn about whatever their interest in; I'm their one-on-one teacher so they learn how to do it themselves. Consulting is making recommendations for what may work best, and the client needs less instruction. Garden design and installation can be completely hands off for the client — their complete, turnkey solution, but the clients still need instruction on how to care for what is installed.

In speaking to a client about what they need, I help them get the right mix of service for that client."

Harris agrees. "Garden coaching clients want several different things," she says. "Clarification of which of their plants are weeds and which are keepers, and how to care for them. Design ideas about the creation of a new garden, or improvements in one that's existing, including the drawing of borders with marking paint. They want instruction in pruning their shrubs, plant choice ideas and after their purchases are on site, help in placing each plant and sometimes instruction in how to plant it and water it."

For experienced gardeners, they may need a coach to provide "a new set of eyes on their design, even permission to remove a plant that's not doing well."

Garden coaches can assist you in many ways, but they don't actually design and install your garden. "I definitely try to draw a line and stick to it between instruction and doing," Harris explains. "So if someone really wants someone to design and install a garden, I refer them to someone else, or if they need manual labor done, I help them find it. I'll only dig, prune or water just enough

to show people how it's done."

A garden coach is not for you if you want all the decisions made for you or simply want a garden maintenance crew. "The motto on my website is 'The gardening consultant for the do-it-yourselfer,'" Harris says.

Most garden coaches charge by the hour, although some charge per project. Hourly rates vary widely from \$30-100 per hour. Some coaches charge a flat hourly fee. Others charge a fee depending on the task such as \$35 for plant shopping and \$90 per hour for consulting and planting.

Having a garden coach is not a foolproof guarantee of a green thumb. Cohen observes, "Well, unfortunately, some people don't follow instructions! For example, you tell them to water each day their containers in full sun, but they don't. Nature takes over, and their plants die. Sometimes it takes doing things the wrong way to learn; as long as you learn from your mistakes, and tend to your garden differently, you will have better success the next time, and feel good about the process."

Kathy Jentz is editor of *Washington Gardener Magazine* (www.washingtongardener.com).

