



• Garden Coach Dicie Hansen •

PHOTOGRAPHY: LAURA EKSTROM

Need Help?

Ask a Garden Coach

BY MARY KLEST

If a garden is causing more angst than awe, it may be time for a change. Learning what direction to take can replace chaos with calm and joy. If you're wondering what to do with that overgrown shrub, the perennial garden is growing out of control, or you've bought lots of plants and have no clue what to do with them, call a garden coach. Dicie Hansen, who grew up gardening with her mother at their Barrington Hills home, specializes in rescuing gardens and those who tend them.

When the weight of a heavy snowfall split two of their hemlock trees, Donna and Michael Baker knew the trees had to be removed. Their question then became do they start fresh or salvage what remained? Circling the trees in their entrance courtyard at Lake Barrington Shores was 14 years of growth that Donna Baker described as "tired looking."

After several failed attempts to create a beautiful, low maintenance garden, North Barrington resident DeDe Zwilling was ready to put sod in her wooded backyard. "I was replanting every year and didn't want to do that anymore," she said.

They turned to garden coach Dicie Hansen for answers. Garden coaches most often work with homeowners who take an active role in the design and care of their gardens. They lie somewhere between the determined do-it-yourselfers and those quick-to-call landscapers. Hansen described her clients this way: "They are primarily people who have some experience gardening but not enough to feel comfortable rehabbing a garden or a significant portion of their property on their own. They want someone who will help them create a game plan for moving forward."

Hansen agreed that the Baker's hemlock trees had to be removed. After an on-site visit and discussion of the couple's wish list, she recommended they tear out the existing plants and start anew. "She was terrific with plant selections," Donna Baker said. A red maple tree now serves as a focal point. "Our Knock Out® Roses add a color element for the whole season. Something is blooming at all different times."

For Zwilling's backyard, Hansen recommended planting hardy perennials. Zwilling learned that a slew of problems, including drainage and light conditions, had thwarted her previous efforts. She discovered that most of

her plant selections were favored by hungry wildlife. When Hansen looked at her garden, she said, "This is a fruit salad for deer."

"Dicie presented information at my level of understanding. She created a workable plan that includes photos," Zwilling said.

FINDING ANSWERS | Garden dilemmas can happen at any time to anyone. "I can tell if I'm a good fit for a client by the questions they ask," Hansen said. "If they say, 'I don't care, do whatever you want,' they are better suited to work with a landscaper. If they tell me they've tried this or that and want to find answers to a problem, I can help them." She doesn't do installations of any kind but will help clients pick out plants best suited for their landscape. Garden coaches are not in the business of selling plants or creating large-scale design, so they often focus on using what a homeowner already has. "That's where we really provide value," Hansen said.

Finding answers can begin with a phone call. Potential clients should be prepared to answer a few questions. How big is the space? What gardening experience do you have? What are your budget constraints, time line, and color preferences? It's often good to briefly describe your lifestyle, too. Do you have children? Pets?

Hansen typically visits a home site once per project. There she discusses the problem and solutions in detail. The visit may last one to three hours depending on the size of the site and the issues to be covered.

Jim Beran wanted more privacy in his backyard. His home in Algonquin had a pool and deck from where he could see neighbors up and down the street. "The yard needed some height along the perimeter, some color other than 'grass green,' and a patio for the grill and fire pit. As a do-it-yourselfer, I was happy to put in the time to do the work," Beran said. But he questioned his sense of style. He also had no idea what plants would work well.

With guidance from Hansen, he was able to find what he needed. He learned about plant arrangement and location, how to fertilize, and what ongoing maintenance was required.

Hansen prepares a garden notebook for her clients. She photographs the site and creates a document that describes tasks to be performed. It may include a list of plants to be saved, transplanted, or removed. She has written notebooks from as few as three pages to 50 pages.

“What I do really depends on what the client needs,” she said. Hansen quotes a flat, inclusive fee per project. That way the client knows upfront what the cost will be. For site only visits, her fee starts at \$100.

A PERSONAL COACH | Garden coaches often get to know their clients. Sometimes they give assurance that a good decision was made. Other times they steer clients away from unrealistic expectations. They inspire clients to follow through with a plan even when the going gets tough. “Dicie offers hands-on support backed by skill and judgment. I trust her,” Donna Baker said.

“Dicie let me know what she can or can’t, will, or won’t do,” Zwilling said. “She’s a great listener and expert gardener.”

Hansen’s childhood was spent in Barrington Hills. She learned gardening from her mother, Barbara. She was named Dicie after her great grandmother, who was also an accomplished gardener. Digging in the earth became second nature to Dicie. She views gardening as “an essential part of life.” An avid vegetable gardener, she’s researching victory gardens in hope of putting a 21st century spin on the idea for a book she wants to write.

Like many garden coaches, Hansen’s career path is winding. She spent 20 years in the financial services industry followed by management consulting. Then she turned to her passion. “Sinking my hands into the earth at early morning has always been life affirming, energizing, and rewarding for me.” She went back to school at Harper College and earned certificates in landscape design and plant propagation.

She said experienced gardeners are sometimes hesitant to show her an unkempt garden. “They may worry about the way it looks. I tell them that gardens grow every day. If it was perfect, they wouldn’t need me.”

This year Zwilling is giving a copy of her garden plan to a yardman who will do the planting. From there on, she’ll follow the guidelines in the garden notebook prepared by Hansen.

“I can’t say I’m anything close to an expert, but I certainly have a much better idea of how to select various plants to achieve my goals,” Jim Beran said.

OTHER CHOICES | For new homeowners developing an entire site plan, Hansen recommends working with landscape architects. Their services focus on design and installation, not the kind of advice a garden coach gives on how to manage and maintain a garden.

Garden center advisers can be a good source of information but they cannot see the site or check soil and light conditions. They cannot give advice on where to locate a vegetable garden or how to cut back shrubs that have started to shade a flower garden.

Hansen said books are a good source of ideas and information but have limitations. “A book can’t test the drainage or tell you ‘Yes that is powdery mildew on your phlox.’” Beran agreed. “Books don’t provide feedback and guidance along the way.”

Not only will your garden gain the benefits of a coach, but you can grow with it, too.



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TIPS FROM THE GARDEN COACH

*Gardens don’t just happen.
The following strategies can help when
undertaking a garden project.*

- ✿ Before you start digging, have a plan.
- ✿ Determine a budget for the project. When needed, build your garden in phases over several years.
- ✿ When you buy plants, take a list with you. Avoid impulse purchases.
- ✿ Basic tools to own include a shovel, iron rake, leaf rake, trowel, and Felco pruners (red/organ handle). Good gloves: heavy leather if you’re working with roses, goatskin for other work.
- ✿ When doing your own digging, go slow. “You’re supposed to be having fun, not crippling yourself,” Hansen said.
- ✿ When in doubt, plant for drought. Drought tolerant plants are usually low maintenance and hardy.
- ✿ Plant where you spend most of your time.
- ✿ Keep a garden journal. Identify new plants and record observations on what thrives and what dies. Include photos during all seasons.
- ✿ To get inspired, visit the Chicago Botanic Garden and the Morton Arboretum.
- ✿ For work you can’t do yourself, get cost estimates from at least three landscape companies.

TO LEARN MORE

Dicie Hansen is teaching a series of classes during the spring session of the Beyond 220 Community Education Program. Topics to be covered include garden design, managing overgrown landscapes, 21st century victory gardens, and choosing perennials. She’ll discuss and critique landscapes from photos. To register, visit www.barrington220.org or call 847-842-3510.