

When a house is torn down, what happens to the lovely plants surrounding it?

By Washington Post Columnist [John Kelly](#)

“I think it’s a hardy bunch coming out,” **Carol Meyers** tells me. It’s Monday morning, and we’re standing on a quiet residential street in Chevy Chase, Md., dressed in layers to keep out the chill.

Carol pulls the first of two big black trash bags from the back seat of her car. They’re full of empty plastic pots, each a tiny lifeboat for the greenery about to be saved from near-certain death.

The plant rescuers of the Bethesda Community Garden Club are in the house.

From left: Marty Fears, Candy Kessel, Irene Sinclair and Nina Stark-Slapnik in the front yard of a house slated for a teardown. Members of the Bethesda Community Garden Club rescue doomed perennials to sell at their annual plant sale. (John Kelly/The Washington Post)

Well, *outside* the house. The single-family home we’re parked in front of was bought by a developer. Sometime in the next few months, it will be torn down and replaced by something grander. Normally, the perennials surrounding it — lovingly tended over the years by the previous owners — would fall under a bulldozer’s blade. But Carol and a half-dozen other garden club members are here, spades in hand, to salvage what they can.

One member is already shoveling around the drip line of a tiny boxwood not much larger in circumference than a beach ball. Another is eyeing the purplish shoots of an emergent peony. Four or five pots hold pale green sedum, just uprooted.

In the backyard, **Nina Stark-Slapnik** and **Elaine Hope** are moving among the beds, making an inventory and calling out what they see: ajuga, stokesia, spirea, pulmonaria, epimedium . . .

“Oh, look at this,” says Nina. “Oh my god, has she got sarcococca?”

She leans down to examine a blanket of glossy green leaves surrounding the base of a tall oak tree.

Candy Kessel digs out a bed of a plant called sarcococca in the backyard of a house slated for a teardown. (John Kelly/The Washington Post)

“We’re like little kids in a candy store,” says Elaine.

“We try to figure out what’s the most valuable,” Nina says.

Once potted, the perennials will spend the next month scattered among members before being sold at the Club’s annual plant sale, May 9, from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Bethesda Farm Women’s Market. Regulars know the good stuff will go fast. “It’s like a pocketbook sale at Saks,” Carol says.

“Often with a teardown, there’s very little worth digging,” Nina says. “It’s unusual to get a garden that’s other than average.”

This garden, created by a fellow garden club member who is moving to a retirement home with her husband, is above average. Daffodils in full flower dot the yard like exclamation points.

Nina Stark-Slapnik pots a perennial in the front yard of a house slated for a teardown. (John Kelly/The Washington Post)

“I won’t dig without permission,” says Nina, head of the plant sale committee. “I knock on doors. I call. Members alert me. We do the best we can.”

When Nina hears about a teardown, she tries to get in touch with the developers, but they often don’t call her back. “Then I come back, and it’s all ripped up anyway,” she says.

The club, founded in 1923, uses money from the plant sale to fund beautification projects, including maintaining the landscape around Bethesda’s two public libraries.

Candy Kessel has taken on the task of digging up the sarcococca. She uses her shovel to muscle them out of the ground, then deposits them on a plastic sled. The women of the garden club — and they are all women — keep an eye out for cheap sleds, preferring them to wheelbarrows for hauling plants and dirt.

Birds are excited by the soil that’s being turned over.

“Well, the robins are all out to get the worms,” Candy says. “We have given them a breakfast treat.”

In the front yard, **Gwen Stewart** is getting instructions on how to safely pull up a peony. “I joined so that I could learn from these ladies,” she says. “This is my therapy.”

Good gardeners, Nina says, like to get down in the weeds. She means that literally but also metaphorically.

“It’s really a life thing,” she says. “It’s not just gardening. I think that’s a life skill. Life comes at you in small details and large details.”

In the backyard, Elaine has cleared leaves away from the cold ground alongside a flagstone path.

“There’s hostas in here,” she says.

“Oh god, little baby hostas,” Nina echoes.

She kneels and runs her fingers over the ground. Tiny shoots of green — no bigger than the first joint of a pinkie — stick up from the soil.

“You can feel them,” Nina says.

Next year, the hostas will greet spring in a different yard.

(For details on the plant sale, or if you know of a teardown that can use plant rescue, visit bethesdacommunitygardenclub.org.)