



Dr. Pete Barker with his flowers by the Rail Trail in Swampscott.

# The Swampscott doc who's got the flower power

BY STEVE MARANTZ([HTTPS://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/](https://jewishjournal.org/author/steve-marantz/))

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Pete Barker has flower power. He came of age in the 1960s, when it symbolized his opposition to an unpopular war. Today, as a retired family physician, it's about his potted hydrangeas and dahlias that adorn a section of the Rail Trail in Swampscott. More than a few Rail Trail hikers were his patients.

Barker's Manton Road home abutting the Rail Trail was a stop at the town's annual Garden Art Walk in June. Visitors admired his yard's lush plantings and his attached greenhouse in which he gardens in the cold of winter.

When Barker's not digging his fingers into soil, he teaches and lectures at garden clubs and senior centers. This spring he taught "Find Your Green Thumb" at Explorers Lifelong Learning Institute (<https://explorerslli.org/>) in Salem. His course encompassed principles of botany, propagation and feng shui.

"I'm a teacher, that's how I approached being a doctor," said Barker, 77.

Gardening and teaching bring Barker joy, which he spreads generously, like airborne pollen, according to his wife and mother of their two children.

“He loves giving plants to everybody, particularly amaryllis,” said Jeri Barker. “He loves to see somebody else make it bloom, and he’ll insist they send him a picture when it blooms. He enjoys when other people smile when they find out they can make something grow.”

One of his Green Thumb students, Mary Jo Wagner, said Barker “made gardening approachable. Not only did he bring in flowers and plants for us to work with, he developed great PowerPoint [presentations] on each of his topics.”

Barker’s mild manner and eclectic resume bear the indelible imprint of 1960s Bay Area counterculture and Vietnam War protests.

Before he was a family physician in Swampscott for 40 years, a longtime member of Temple Emanu-El in Marblehead, and a graduate of University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore, he was a carpenter in San Francisco. Though he lived near the Haight-Ashbury district, a mecca for hippies, he did not identify as one. “I was more involved in trying to find my way in life and opposition to the Vietnam War,” Barker recalled.

He was a conscientious objector, part of the movement that coined the phrase “flower power” to represent peaceful resistance and non-violent opposition to the war. He was given 4-F medically unfit status at the Oakland Induction Center in 1970 or 1971 – he can’t recall the date.

During that time he wrote a booklet about experiential education and persuaded a group of parents to fund a private alternative K-8 school in Mendocino County, north of San Francisco. Among the courses he taught was gardening. “The school had a garden, and I enjoyed teaching the kids about plants,” Barker recalled. “We made a greenhouse, and we took field trips to look at gardens and greenhouses. In the spring we went to each kid’s house and helped get their gardens going.”

Barker grew up in the University City suburb of St. Louis and learned to garden from his parents. The Barkers attended Temple Israel, where the rabbi in the mid-’60s was Martin Katzenstein. When Barker moved to Swampscott and inquired about Temple Emanu-El, he was delighted to learn that Katzenstein, who died in 1970, had served as its rabbi in the late 1950s. “That kind of sealed the deal,” Barker recalled.

Pete and Jeri met in Baltimore, while he was in medical school and she was getting her master’s in social work. The Barkers married in 1981 after moving to Lansing, Michigan, for his three-year residency. In 1984, Jeri’s homing instinct – she grew up in Haverhill – brought

them to Massachusetts. Barker set up shop at 250 Paradise Road while he and Jeri raised their son Danny and daughter Melanie. They moved to Manton Road in 1990, but between work and parenting, spare moments to garden were precious.

“I was a fast gardener,” he chuckled. “I didn’t have a lot of time to put stuff in or to do it intensely. For 40 years, I didn’t read much except medical stuff.”

Early in 2024, he decided the time had come to retire. In retirement Barker golfs – his other passion – and gardens in earnest. Seedlings started in his basement graduate to his greenhouse, where, on a recent June day, he identified cyclamen, succulents, orchids, spider plant, sweet potato and avocado. Outside, in his yard, Barker displayed salvia, lupine, foxglove, coleus, tuberous begonia, hosta, and dahlias. Also, phlox and rhododendrons, though past peak and faded.

“My favorite is the dahlia,” he said. “Unusual this year was how early they bloomed. The nice thing about dahlias is that they bloom through the frost. The more you cut them, the more you get.”

His vegetable gardens have broccoli, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, cabbage, lettuce, snow peas, zucchini, tomatoes, garlic, onions and potatoes. “I don’t do well with root crops,” Barker said ruefully.

He ponders the inner life of plants, after reading, “Light Eaters: How the Unseen World of Plant Intelligence Offers a New Understanding of Life on Earth.” “It’s about plant communication and adaptation,” Barker said. “Plants are really more amazing beings than is generally recognized.”

Caring for plants is different than caring for people, Barker said. “With people it’s a big deal if things don’t go well. With plants, if they don’t make it you say, ‘Oh well,’ and you try again. You do what you can do. I look at plants as a little bit more forgiving than people.”

‘Flower power’ in 2025 has shed the anti-war connotation of Barker’s youth. Today, it’s about another force for good – gardening. Barker suggested that more gardeners and gardens might change the world for the better: “I have no grand illusions,” he said, “but the world would probably be a little kinder, gentler and prettier in some small way.”

His garden, he said, “is the place where I feel the most relaxed, and thoughtful, and even spiritual.”

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