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A business grew from her injuries

By Denise Cowie
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When Toby Rabold suffered incapacitating repetitive-strain problems affecting her hands and arms, not only was her career in jeopardy, but so was her love affair with gardening.

Rabold has been crazy about gardening most of her life, and an active gardener for a quarter-century. Back in 1980, she and her husband, David, bought an old barn on a swath of land in Coopersburg, Lehigh County, with the idea of turning it into their dream home.

"I had two acres and a creek to play with," says Rabold, who gradually established sun and shade gardens, a garden filled with hostas, another of roses, and a water garden. "There's a lot of daylilies, a lot of native plants - and a lot of fences to keep the deer out."

Much was designed to be low-maintenance, which turned out to be a very good thing. In 1999, she says, she developed repetitive-stress injuries from her computer work as a financial analyst, and she was unable to use her hands at all that summer. After carpal-tunnel surgery, she had a brief respite, but within a couple of years the problem affected not only her hands and arms but her back. By early last year, she was on disability.

Her tribulations led her to start a Web-based business to help others avoid the same fate.

"I started looking around for tools that would help me," she says. In England, she found an Easi-Grip trowel, which she still uses. Later, she came across Fiskars' Softouch scissors. "I could use those scissors when I couldn't use anything else," she recalls, "and I thought, 'There have to be more tools out there like this.' "

There were, of course. Many companies now produce ergonomic tools, but finding them, or even learning what kinds exist, can be daunting.

"That's when I decided to start HandHelpers," Rabold says, "so that people could find all kinds of tools in one place - for computing, for the kitchen, and for other household [chores], as well as for gardening." The tools are listed at www.handhelpers.com (1-888-632-7091).

Thanks to her tools, Rabold is back to gardening, though only for 10 to 15 minutes at a time, and no more than an hour a day.

"It keeps me sane," she says.

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