

## **Robin Vesey, Conservation Champion**

by Carolyn Myers Lindberg



Robin Vesey always loved the outdoors but she wasn't a restoration fanatic until she started running in Terwilliger Parkway. Her training program took her through the trails of the park where she slowly began to notice all the ivy growing up the trees. Curious, she looked into tree ivy and found out that it was not a good thing at all. Robin says once you find out the truth, you can never go back.

Robin's father was in the military so she lived all over the world, places like Scotland and France. But her grandparents lived in Ohio and she thinks her commitment to the natural world began there. When she was little, her mother took her to Lake Erie. Something had killed a lot of fish and a large number of them had washed ashore. Her mother made her use her bucket and shovel to bury some of them, and she thought a lot about what caused so many fish to die. As an adult, she made the conscious decision to move to Portland for what she calls "the green outdoors." After spending her childhood in Scotland, after all, she was used to the cloudy skies and rain!

Her commitment has led her to take part and organize about 19 work parties a year in Terwilliger Parkway. At first, Robin says she used to watch some of the volunteers as she was running through the park and thought it was all so silly – the ivy just grows back, right? Then she learned how effective it is and now finds the work incredibly satisfying. Robin says she likes ripping things out more than planting because it's so therapeutic and you can see the results of your labor immediately. Now when she travels around the world, it drives her nuts to see ivy all over the place.

She became an advocate for the parkway, joined the board of directors in 1994, and started organizing restoration work parties. Robin says she learned about invasive and native plants by talking with people who shared her disgust of invasive weeds. She and her husband have almost a quarter acre, so she started working in her own yard ripping out all the ivy she could find. She laughs when she thinks about how she'd hold onto to a tree by her finger-tips or hang off a cliff to reach the ivy on her sloped property. Little by little Robin noticed that once you removed the weeds, the native plants are there...they just need the opportunity to get some sunlight and moisture to grow. She has a wide variety of native plants on her property now, including Oregon grape, snowberry, and fringe cup...many that she's planted on her own.

Eventually Robin thought it would be great to be rewarded for all her work improving natural habitat and fortunately there was a program that would do just that – the Backyard Habitat Certification program, which offered native plants at discounted prices for enrollees. Not being one to do anything halfway, she entered the program and went for Platinum, the highest certification level offered. Her neighbors noticed and several also got involved in the program, but it's not unusual to see Robin pulling weeds in other people's yards, whether they are in the program or not.

Most of her work is in Terwilliger Parkway because it's her neighborhood and where she feels she can have the most impact. Whether it's on the ground or politically, Robin feels it's best to advocate for and be involved locally. She feels the best thing that ever happened for Oregon's natural areas was when

the state banned the sale and propagation of English ivy in 2010. Robin feels the most rewarding aspect of clearing ivy is how it exposes the natural world. So she rips out ivy, removes downed tree limbs from trails and notices when new areas of the parkway need attention.

There have been challenges. Robin remembers when the Friends of Terwilliger Parkway was able to purchase a parcel of land called Eagle Point in 2013. The parcel is a little over an acre and has spectacular views of Mt. Hood. The city deconstructed a house on the property that dated back to the 1800s and subsequently removed lots of invasive species and installed native plants. Then in 1995-96, they purchased 38 acres in the parkway as part of a Metro bond measure to acquire more natural spaces. She also remembers that when she first got involved with Friends of Terwilliger they fought a large development project on private land along the parkway. Thankfully, she says, they had a group of committed volunteers and an enlightened city council that put together a plan to purchase the land and take it out of development. The two things she's most proud of are getting that land and removing all the ivy over the years.

Robin now looks toward the future. The Friends group organized a successful centennial celebration in 2012 and built a park gateway sign at the North entrance, a metal sign with a stone base across from Terwilliger Plaza. Now she's working to help raise money for the other two gateway signs and come up with a better plan to handle traffic impacts.

But Robin isn't daunted by the challenges, she's always in action. You'll see her running through Terwilliger Parkway, keeping her eagle eyes open for what needs to be done to conserve and protect her own little slice of nature.