



Seattle Times: Plant Amnesty founder Cass Turnbull, author and lover of open spaces, dies

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By

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A real-life [Lorax](#), Cass Turnbull spoke for the trees.

A staunch defender of trees and open space, she used humor as her secret weapon, starting with the name of her signature achievement, the founding of [PlantAmnesty](#) 30 years ago. The nonprofit's aim was "to stop the senseless torture and mutilation of trees and shrubs."

Plant Amnesty, which now has nearly 1,200 members in 32 states and three countries, offers inexpensive pruning classes and workshops, as well as a referral service for arborists, gardeners and pruners.

Mrs. Turnbull authored two books, including [Cass Turnbull's Guide to Pruning](#) (Sasquatch, 2012), now in its third edition.

She also created a political-action group to bring her fight for trees into the public sphere. [TreePac](#) took on the task of toughening the city's tree ordinance, and digging into the minutiae of land-use laws to defend trees and green spaces.

Mrs. Turnbull died Jan. 26 while on vacation in Hawaii, from a heart attack after a swim. She was 65.

Mrs. Turnbull began her career as a laborer at the Seattle Parks Department.

“That was her introduction to the importance of the value of natural spaces, and where she became more interested in the plant world,” said her sister, Ghaska Cleland Branch, of Seattle. “It wasn’t just pruning; it was the whole importance of nature. Not just the health benefits but the civic benefits.”

Mrs. Turnbull, born Katherine Fauntelle Cleland in 1951, grew up in Magnolia and attended Fairhaven College in Bellingham. She met her husband, John, while working together building a boardwalk trail at Discovery Park. The couple married in 1987.

It was not only her vision but her ability to articulate issues that made Mrs. Turnbull such a force.

“She knew how to speak in everyday language in words that matter to people, things like ‘Where are the kids in all of these apartment buildings going to play,’ ” said Mary Fleck, co-chair of the nonprofit Seattle Green Spaces Coalition. “She cut through all the policy to get to the heart of things.”

She wasn’t afraid to be zany or offbeat.

“She knew getting people excited about pruning was not going to be an easy thing to do. She knew she needed to do it with a sense of humor,” said Laura Watson, a board member of Plant Amnesty. “She was so full of knowledge too, and so curious about everything — what is that spider doing, what are owls all about.”

Mrs. Turnbull used whimsy to spearhead her advocacy, too. When the city sold a small, scarified vacant lot for development behind an auto-repair shop, a block from the roaring traffic on Aurora Avenue and 80th Street in Greenwood, Mrs. Turnbull responded with a guerrilla artist’s flair.

She turned the vacant lot and its chain-link fence into a [pop-up menagerie](#), buying stuffed animals by the dozens from thrift stores and fake ivy. She wound the greenery through the links and tucked the animals into its openings.

Inside the fence, a horse as tall as a toddler stood by “meadows” of green felt, and stuffed ducks sat by “ponds” cut from plastic tarp.

She regularly replaced those items with the help of like-minded volunteers, as kids made off with the stuffed animals — she intended them as neighborhood gifts — or the developer took it all away.

“Life is so dull, one day so much like the next, why not do something fun?” she said in an interview as she worked at the menagerie on a dreary day last November.

The tactic was effective, turning heads, and raising the issue of what to do with vacant substation lots owned by the city all over Seattle.

One of her recent causes was preservation of a 32-acre surplus property put up for sale by the city of Seattle. Mrs. Turnbull joined forces with Fleck and others to prevent the sale and preserve the [Myers Way South property near White Center](#).

It was just the sort of vacant land she grew up exploring as a girl in Seattle that gave her a love of nature, [Mrs. Turnbull wrote in the West Seattle Herald](#).

She urged the protection of Seattle's forgotten, often scruffy places with an urgency that cut through Seattle's endless process of meetings. "It was her enthusiasm, the necessity, the now-ness," said Katherine Morrison, a board member of TreePac. "It was, 'This has to be dealt with now, or we are going to lose this forever.' "

As Seattle grows denser, Mrs. Turnbull also argued passionately for the value of big trees, and for [protecting and increasing the city's urban tree cover](#).

A state-certified arborist, landscaper and master gardener, Mrs. Turnbull also worked to educate the public about tree topping, a practice she deplored, warning it destroys the vigor and beauty of trees.

Ever practical, Mrs. Turnbull engaged Spanish-language instructors in pruning classes, to reach the crews actually doing the work.

"She realized that was how she could change the face of the city. She didn't just reach out to the gardeners; she reached out to the crews," said Val Easton, a longtime garden columnist who [wrote a profile of Mrs. Turnbull](#) for The Seattle Times' Pacific Magazine.

"She was involved in so many ways, in people's gardens and green spaces; her advocacy was garden by garden and plant by plant."

In addition to her husband and sister, Mrs. Turnbull is survived by a stepmother, Nancy Callaghan, of Seattle; two cousins; and her beloved cats, Trouble and Sweetie.

A celebration of her life is being planned by Plant Amnesty.

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