

# Cultivate calmness with a labyrinth

Janet Eastman *The Oregonian/OregonLive*

Since ancient times, people have found solace while walking the curving path of a classic labyrinth. The liminal spaces that represent transitions between one point in time and the next are needed even more today, during turmoil and stay-at-home orders caused by the coronavirus, say proponents.

Unlike walking in a straight line, going for a run or taking a winding hike in nature, a repeated patterned path that doesn't change can free your mind to take a meditative journey, explains landscape architect and labyrinth builder Stephen Shibley of Fertile Ground in Estacada.

Classical or modern designs have a rhythm, "like a metronome," and perambulating a familiar path reduces stress, promotes health and "grounds us," he says, when "our way of life often spins at a pace that leaves us off balance."

Terry Styner and Andy Miller installed a medieval-inspired brick labyrinth in their Beaverton backyard in 2014 and continue to feel the benefits.

"During these very stressful days, we find it calming to walk the labyrinth," says Styner. "It helps to focus on being present in the moment. It helps us remember that the angst around staying at home will go away eventually."

In 2001, Pat Reser designed the labyrinth in her Beaverton backyard in the Crete tradition, with a gravel walking path outlined with plants selected by garden designer Lucy Hardiman.

"Walking the path provides incredible insight into issues that are clamoring for a solution or a pace that needs to be slowed to allow for thoughtful understanding," says Reser.

Saturday is the 12th annual World Labyrinth Day and people across the globe will take solo and virtual walks hosted by the Labyrinth Society. Others can join in by forming an outdoor pattern out of birdseed, tracing a finger labyrinth on paper (download one at [labyrinthociety.org/download-a-labyrinth](http://labyrinthociety.org/download-a-labyrinth)) or on a mobile app like Labyrinth Journey.

Shibley is installing a labyrinth at a spiritual center in Milwaukie. He will draw the five-circuit design onto newly laid sod, what he calls "a fresh canvas." He will then cut strips in the sod to embed brick borders.

"The labyrinth will be the centerpiece of a circular lawn and will be surrounded by fine, crushed granite, landscaping and benches," says Shibley.

Shibley creates classical labyrinths mown into grass that start at \$300 for three circuits, \$500 for five circuits or \$700 for seven-circuit patterns, without bricks or other permanent line work. For about \$5,000, he can create a five-circuit classical labyrinth with bricks inlaid into a 24-foot grass circle.

Owners maintain the patterns by mowing when the grass grows too tall and edging around the bricks.

"This is a time that is trying all of our patience in a variety of ways," says the land artist. "A labyrinth in the time of COVID-19 is a way to support individuals and families struggling to make peace with this difficult journey of being 'stuck in-between' what was, what is and what will be. Walking a labyrinth is a way to move forward at a time when a journey of hope is greatly needed."

For almost 15 years, Shibley has had some form of labyrinth mown into his backyard lawn. Over the last five years, he has maintained a 21-foot-diameter, five-circuit brick inlaid labyrinth that he can see from his bedroom windows and deck. This year, he spun the labyrinth. He says the new decade was calling him to a new perspective. "It was time to enter 'life' from a new vantage point," he says.



Stephen Shibley of Fertile Ground, an Estacada-based landscape architecture firm, designs and installs simple to complex labyrinths for clients. He says that do-it-yourselfers could mow grass in a pattern and discover "peaceful meanderings in place." Photos by Fertile Ground



Classical or modern labyrinth designs have a rhythm, "like a metronome," explains landscape architect and labyrinth builder Stephen Shibley.

During a difficult time in the past, he walked the circuit every day "to be still in the midst of a storm," he says, adding that he could have tried to avoid the emotional tempest but instead wanted to learn how to navigate it. Moving through his labyrinth was like putting on a life jacket and embracing the journey.

"I created a safe space, a container in my home environment, to be still," he says. "I'm not someone who can be still. But this is a perfect tool for my transformation, that daily practice of walking and becoming still."

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## Create a labyrinth

Stephen Shibley of Fertile Ground, an Estacada-based landscape architecture firm, designs and installs simple to complex labyrinths for clients. But he says that do-it-yourselfers could mow grass in a pattern and discover "peaceful meanderings in place." He offers this advice:

**Location:** Placement is important. Select a flat piece of land visible from a window, patio or balcony, or nestle it in a part of the yard that provides a safe space to walk, relax and reflect. The entrance to the labyrinth should have a pleasing line of sight across the path. Orient the labyrinth toward a view of a specimen tree or something inspiring or calming.

**Grass:** Shibley recommends tough, hardy grasses from seed or sod like dwarf fescue, which is drought-tolerant, robust and resilient in sun or shade. Fertilize and water the lawn and let the blades grow long enough that a pattern will be visible when a path is cut with a lawnmower set on a lower cutting height.

**Pattern:** Find a design you like and scale it. Three-, five- or seven-circuit classical labyrinths are easiest to install and maintain.

**Size:** A minimum of a 20 foot diameter works best for a mown three-circuit labyrinth. For a small backyard or patio, use string, rope, sticks, stones and other small items to create the line work. You can even draw out a labyrinth with tape, chalk or paint. Determine the size and make a guide rope to lay out the pattern.

**Maintain the design:** Mow the path at the same cutting height as the rest of the lawn and raise the mower cutting height to the highest setting to trim the taller grass that makes up the lines. Or let the taller grass grow wild.

**Indoors:** The Labyrinth Society has instructions on making a Chartres labyrinth with masking tape on a patio or indoors on tile, terrazzo or short-nap commercial-grade carpeting at [labyrinthociety.org/make-a-labyrinth](http://labyrinthociety.org/make-a-labyrinth). (Tape can damage the finish of wooden floors.) Instructions show how to lay out the concentric circles, enclose 11 circuits, create back-to-back turns shaped like bowties that are called labryses as well as the six flower petals in the center and the circles forming the halo around the outside of the labyrinth.