

Chapter 2

Climate Map: Thrive in Your Natural Growing Zone

by Kathleen

“The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities.” – Adrienne Rich

Texas sage comes from Betsy’s home state, growing best in dry, chalky soils. If she tries to plant some in hot and humid Florida, it will surely die. Just as plants thrive best in their natural climate, so will you, agewise. You can keep pretending you’re forty-nine, but it’s gone forever, and aren’t you smarter today anyway? Life for women over fifty is full of joyful opportunities, but many are unaware of the possibilities and potential because it’s unexplored new territory. Perhaps, I thought, if women could see what life after fifty *could* be, they would embrace it rather than try to avoid it. The Women’s Growing Zones chart that follows is the result.

As children, we’re egocentric, certain that we are the center of our universe. Other people exist to serve and love us. We have an incredible capacity for learning, and everything fascinates us, from tiny sand crabs at the beach to changes in the shape of the moon.

When we become adults, we take on more responsibilities—at work, building a career, perhaps becoming a wife and mother. We’re more practical, making decisions with our heads rather than our hearts. These are the “responsible” years, which we often spend nurturing others. Our mantra becomes “I have to” instead of a child’s “I want to.” What we do in our middle decades is necessary and normal for that time of life, but often our sense of self becomes buried under daily pressures, demands on our time, and the needs of other people.

Accept your natural growing zone

After fifty, life continues to shift focus. Look at Zone 3. Once again, like a child, you can be yourself, only magnified by all of your experiences and wisdom. If you allow yourself to move into your age’s natural growing zone, bountiful opportunities await you. These are purposeful years, and your new mantra will become “I choose to.”

Since moving from one zone to the next happens gradually, highlight on each line of the chart (moving left to right) which of the three phrases best describes you today. If you prefer, you can print the chart from our Web site <http://www.secondbloomingforwomen.com>. In general, you'll have marks in Zones 2 and 3 (although one frustrated woman said, "My sister's age is in Zone 3, but her behavior's stuck in Zone 1.>").

The goal of this book is to help you steadily advance into Zone 3 so you can reap its benefits. It's time to rejoice in being alive, and like all plants and flowers, you'll bloom most brilliantly in your natural climate.

Women's Growing Zones

Zone 1

Zone 2

Zone 3

Baby/child Selfish "I want to"	Adult woman Responsible "I have to"	Woman after 50 Purposeful "I choose to"
World is wide open; no focus	Building career and family	World expands again; focused
Self-oriented	Other-oriented	World or community-oriented
World exists to serve me	Give my best to others; little personal freedom, many responsibilities	Living an authentic life, using talents, strengths, skills for something meaningful
Sense of entitlement	Personal dreams put on hold, buried or forgotten, not a priority	My dreams are unearthed; I'm serving, contributing my gifts to world or community.
Wildly expanding knowledge and abilities	Respond to external demands; many activities to juggle	Fewer, but more meaningful, activities and commitments
Use sensory experiences	Focus on head; rational and practical	Follow heart, soul, passions
Open to love from all sources	Love family, friends	Love of humanity
Yes and no clearly expressed	Often unsure when, why, or how to say yes and no	Yes and no are tied to my goals and values
Feelings are transparent	Feelings are suppressed or masked	I own my feelings, value myself, live true to my nature
Developing an identity, a sense of self	Sense of "self" gets lost or put aside	Living my purpose; clear sense of self; freedom to choose
It's always my turn	Will I ever get a turn?	It's my turn again to rekindle my passions and dreams
Life lasts forever; death has no meaning	Death is real, but distant	Death is real and getting closer, but motivating
No time limits on life	There's always tomorrow	It's now or never

If the benefits of living in Zone 3 are so significant, what holds us back? Several cultural forces are at work that we need to be aware of, so let's start by being honest about the issues women face as we get older.

Society's view of older women

Betsy and I asked our women's discussion group, "How does our society view women over fifty?" which prompted various responses. Shelby said, "I do see the negatives. The pictures presented in fashion, on TV—they're young women with big lips and eyes, they're thin—they look like what we're "supposed" to. Even older men don't notice me anymore. No heads turn when I walk in a room. The conversation is directed toward younger people." Then she added, "My husband keeps reinforcing for me how attractive I am, but he has a young mental picture of me."

Beth didn't agree with the negative picture many women have. "I view women over fifty as beautiful, gifted. I personally don't see negativity based on age or a loss of value. Beauty is superficial. Looks have never driven me, except in my teens."

Maripaul observed, "As more women of notoriety become fifty, it's changing somewhat. But there's still a bias against older women."

Mary added, "Society may not be supportive of women our age, but we can ride the top of the wave with affirmations from our husbands and friends."

"I predict boomers will change society," said Beth. "We're going to force new options, creative alternatives. As a group, we're large, powerful, smart."

Since Deb had recently turned fifty, I asked her if she'd started feeling invisible yet, as so many of us do. She was emphatic. "Absolutely. Every woman alive knows exactly what you mean about turning invisible after fifty. It's painful."

Health issues

"What's hard about getting older?" we also asked. Shelby immediately responded, "Health. My sister, for example, just found out she has Parkinson's. Health limits what resources you can use for a full life."

Mary agreed. “When I was diagnosed with lupus, my pain was so severe, I wasn’t sure I could continue. At best, I figured I could live for two years.”

For Maripaul, “The biggest thing for me now is always being in pain. I can’t do what I really enjoy, like surfing. Since I wasn’t going to be a physically active retired person, I had to change my focus.”

While such big health concerns can stop us in our tracks, most of us live as well as we can within our physical limits.

Impact of losing our jobs

Other losses come with aging, too. Whether by choice or necessity, many of us leave our jobs. For years, that job provided not only money, but also relationships, status, security, and a sense of self. For women whose self-image is totally wrapped up in the job, this loss can be devastating. When I first met Mary, lupus had forced her to take a leave of absence from teaching, and she spent the first year just trying to enhance her health. Feeling considerably better after two years, she had to decide whether or not to return to the classroom. Her doctor advised against it, and she reluctantly concurred. But then she faced another huge loss—her self-image—because, “I was born to be a second grade teacher. When I couldn’t teach anymore, I felt empty. The teacher part of me was pulled out and there was nothing left. I questioned, *Who am I?*”

When Beth’s husband developed life-threatening cancer, they sold their home in San Diego and moved into a small beach house he had owned for decades in Pensacola Beach, Florida. A navy wife, Beth was accustomed to moving, but this time she had to leave a job she loved. “Letting go of my career was the hardest part. I went through a period of despair, wondering, *Who am I?*”

Mary and Beth had both asked themselves a version of the existential questions, “Why do I exist? Does my life matter?” Each one of us must answer the questions for ourselves by the choices we make in our lives. It’s harder than you’d think, since society seems to tell us that when we’re older, it’s acceptable and even desirable to follow the pleasure principle, to live the rest of our lives without purpose or meaning. Don’t worry about fulfillment or value or authenticity. Play golf! Have fun! Be happy! Maripaul says the message to women is, “You’re done. Be quiet. Go enjoy your grandchildren.”

Don't misunderstand: Betsy and I encourage you to have fun, to enjoy simple pleasures, to play with your grandchildren; it's essential. But despite what society implies, you can also live on another level, a purposeful one, which is gratification of a different kind.

Losing family and friends

I look at the obituary page now, acutely aware that my age group is "moving up." When my mother died in 1994, I recall vividly a feeling of being eyeball-to-eyeball with eternity because there was no longer a parent in line ahead of me. Yet as parents, we do want to keep the natural order of life. I chuckle to remember my mother in a wheelchair looking at my brother in his wheelchair just two months before she died, saying, "I want to die before you do, and you don't look so good." She did, and he passed away only four months later.

Friends, too, are beginning to die. Friends are a special blessing in life, helping us to live fully, endure our pains and losses, and celebrate our joys. They are our family by choice, each irreplaceable. "I hear that from my mom," agreed Mary. "She's ninety-four and when she looks at pictures, almost everyone in them is gone. Maybe what it suggests is that we need a mix of ages in our lives."

Losing your spouse is documented to be the biggest source of stress, requiring you to redefine yourself and your place in the world. You never "get over it," but must instead live with it and through it, eventually creating a new "normal" for yourself.

Our bodies, our looks

Ah, yes, there's that other great loss, reserved especially for women: our youthful good looks. Don't you wonder when those age spots arrived on your hands? And those lines and bags around your eyes? Or why it's so hard to lose those pesky extra pounds? It seems every spring when the weather warms that my body has done naughty things under my winter clothes—sagging upper arms, rounder tummy, thighs bumpy with cellulite.

Decades ago, women used to be able to "age gracefully," but now we're expected to look forever young, using whatever means necessary. And the means are expanding all the time. Glance in any women's magazine and you'll see lots of ads for breast enlargement or reduction, nose or chin surgery, tummy tucks, and brow lifts. You can treat heavy eyelids, sagging jowls, smile lines (what's wrong with them?), and furrowed brows, thinning lips, and rosy necks.

Treatment methods vary from surgery, to Botox and injectable fillers, to microdermabrasion and laser. But the message is consistent: You *are* your body, and your body isn't good enough. Change it. Fix it. Look young. One plastic surgeon takes this to the extreme with an ad for his services picturing a headless woman.

Check it out for yourself by looking in some women's magazines. Who is pictured? What ages do they seem to be? How do they look? How many seem to be over fifty? What kinds of ads *do* feature older women? For what products? What seems to be the media's unwritten message to older women?

When you buy into the notion that you are only a body, you lose. When you wish or pretend to be younger, you deny reality—who you *really* are—and you miss the opportunity to plan and flourish in maturity. You lose perspective on life itself, that you are part of a process that is ever-changing and ever-intriguing. You are so much more than just a body; you are a grown woman, full of life and dreams yet to be fulfilled, and age gives you the experience and wisdom to live abundantly. As Mary said, “We have so much more to be beautiful about. Our lives have been enriched by our years.”

Here's the bottom line: Are you going to keep trying to buy into the illusion that you can and must look forever young? Or are you going to face reality by accepting yourself as a whole person—body, mind, and soul—and get on with being the best possible woman you can be, whatever your age? It's your choice.

The “good” losses

There are losses in life after fifty, but they're not all bad. I realized as I was writing this chapter that I had experienced many positive ones. Here are some for which I am grateful:

- Fear of failure. I have lost my fear of failure, which allows me to write this book. I'm willing to take the risk because I believe in what Betsy and I are doing, no matter how daunting the process.
- Aversion to risk. Recently, for example, I entered a Toastmasters speech contest. I gave the seven-minute speech with no notes, which had always provided security even if I never looked at them. The risk, of course, was having my mind go completely blank, which happened the first time I made the speech. Had I been age thirty, I'd have cried and quit, but I persisted.

- Shyness. I was abysmally shy well into my thirties and even forties. I'm still basically a quiet person, but I can now confidently fill leadership position, speak to groups of people, and hold lively seminars. And when I enter a room, I automatically look for whoever is standing alone and introduce myself because I know what it's like to be an introvert and overlooked.
- Job. I no longer have a full-time job, which affords me time for piano lessons, book and writing groups, walking and exercising with my husband, long-postponed trips, volunteer work, and especially writing this book. I have time for my choices.
- Family responsibilities. While I grieved deeply when my mother died, her death also freed me from the enormous stress of managing her rapidly declining health while working full time. Our son, too, is grown and gone, with a wonderful wife and an adorable daughter. My only job now is to love them and visit when possible.
- Lack of focus. I'm no longer scattered, pulled in a dozen directions. Little by little, I've ended multiple commitments and responsibilities, focusing on what I want to do and accomplish.
- Forever. This is the most significant loss. At my age, I'm well aware that time is limited, that I won't live forever. It makes me think, choose, prioritize, and do. There's no time to procrastinate if I ever want to say, "I'm making a difference. My life matters."

What's good about growing older?

Betsy and I posed this question to the women, too, and there was a variety of positive responses. Shelby said, "I'm much more outgoing. I can approach people. Before, I was much more reserved. I feel free to express my opinion. I'm open to meeting new people."

Beth said, "I'm *so* seeking opportunities! I'm impervious to magazines. It's time to just choose what I want."

"What's best is having the freedom to choose how to spend time," agreed Mary. "And the pleasure in family, kids and grandkids, of having an impact on them."

While writing this book, we heard stories from many women. One felt more capable because she organized a fund-raiser, which was quite successful, something she said she couldn't have done when she was younger. Other women valued being able to do what they knew was right without worrying about the impact on their career. And most had lost the need to be liked

by everyone; instead, they were more content with themselves and chose to be with people who valued them.

A sense of urgency, because life's clock is ticking, helps us to not waste time on things that aren't important to us. We also largely possess by now the skills, confidence, and attitudes that allow us to be both productive and fulfilled. As Beth observed, "Youth was the time to gather our tools; now is the time to use them."

The new reality for women over fifty

We will live longer than previous generations of women, but will we live better? That question is posed in *Younger Next Year for Women* by Chris Crowley and Henry S. Lodge, M.D. Lodge is an internal medicine doctor and Crowley is both his patient and co-author already in his seventies. They caution, "Americans have achieved such staggering longevity that the real problem is outliving the quality of life, not running out of quantity."¹

Crowley and Dr. Lodge then reassure us with "two amazing numbers, right up front: 70 percent of aging, for women as for men, is voluntary...you do not have to do it. And you can also skip 50 percent of all the sickness and serious accidents you'd expect to have from the time you turn fifty to the day you die."² Wonderful! Not only will we live longer, but also we can live healthier and better, or, in other words, *functionally* younger.

The keys they identify? Just three: exercise, nutrition, and commitment. Their book covers the first two but just touches on commitment, which our book covers in depth. All the work you do and plans you make are for nothing if your body fails you, so start building a healthy physical foundation today for your *Second Blooming*.

Medical advances have given us bonus years, and history has provided us a huge landscape of opportunities. The next step is up to each one of us. What will *you* do? Accept society's notion that older makes you less valuable, and limit your options accordingly? Or treasure yourself, your passions and dreams, and choose to live purposefully and abundantly?

You can start by preparing the soil of your life's garden—your attitude—in the next chapter.

Activities

Talk with an older woman whom you respect. Ask such questions as: How have women's lives and opportunities changed in your lifetime? What's hard or challenging about getting older? What's good? If you could give a word of advice to women about aging, what would it be?

Are any women you know obsessed with losing their looks? How do they try to stave off the aging process? What's the cost to them of focusing so intently on the body?

What "good losses" have you experienced that have helped to prepare you for your Second Blooming?

Additional resources

New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time by Gail Sheehy.

Younger Next Year for Women: Live Strong, Fit, and Sexy—Until You're 80 and Beyond by Chris Crowley and Henry S. Lodge, M.D.