

Using Gardening to Teach Life Skills to Jail Inmates

Horticultural therapy (HT), as described by the American Horticulture Therapy Association, is not only an emerging profession, it is a time-proven practice. The therapeutic benefits of peaceful garden environments have been understood since ancient times. In the 19th century, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and considered to be the "Father of American Psychiatry," reported that garden settings held curative effects for people with mental illness.

Rehabilitative care of hospitalized war veterans in the 1940's and 1950's greatly expanded the practice of HT. Today, HT is recognized as a practical and viable treatment with wide-ranging benefits for people in therapeutic, vocational, and wellness programs.

In 2006, Rock County UW-Extension partnered with the Rock County Sheriff Department's RECAP (Rock County Education and Criminal Addictions Program) to facilitate an organized gardening program on the half-acre parcel of land adjacent to the community garden and nearby the jail facility.

Initial program outcomes included:

- Inmates increased knowledge of gardening and related life skills through a hands-on gardening experience.
- Inmates learned how to plant, grow, maintain, and harvest a vegetable garden.

A nutrition education portion was added when produce became available.

- Inmates increased their knowledge of nutrition and food safety.
- Produce, harvested and collected from the project supplemented jail meal programs and supplied area food pantry fresh produce.

"... whole grain bread is better for you than white breads... you need 5-9 serving of fruit and veggies per day...." Anthony.

"... vegetable soup really ain't all that bad! I did not pick anything out of it and I ate it all. I would NEVER even try it had I been on the outside." Tammy.

Additional outcomes emerged from this program, echoing their academic and vocational training:

- *Cognitive benefits* involve learning new skills and language. Through gardening, participants may improve their decision-making and problem-solving skills, as well as learn to follow complex instructions. They are able to work in a supervised setting while at the same time increasing their awareness of the world around them.
- *Social benefits* are derived from working within a group-learning setting to share, to relate, to compromise and to work towards a common goal. The social interaction by working in a group helps participants to feel better about themselves.
- *Psychological development* includes an improvement of self-esteem and self-confidence. Working with living plants allows the participant to feel a sense of responsibility. Knowing that they must nourish and care for this living plant helps participants feel more productive and motivated.
- *Physical improvements* result from participants working in the fresh air, moving their bodies and adapting to physical changes in a non-threatening environment.

"Getting out of unit and away from same four walls - keeps my mind occupied and not think of bad stuff." Steven

"My wife and kids go to Echo [food pantry]. Even though I'm in here, I still feel like I'm providing for them." Chip.

"I need to be a good role model for my kids... I like that the garden gives back to the community..." Chris.

"I already know how to rototill... it's now learning how to work with others." Gary.

Through teaching offenders positive and constructive behaviors-- in this case gardening-- reduction of recidivism is the ultimate goal and desired outcome achieved in this program.

"...I never had a garden before but would like to have one now that I know more." Carl.

"I learned how to enjoy life's simple pleasures." Carlos.



Curricula

Horticulture information consisted of modified Master Gardener Volunteer training materials utilized in the Rock County program and from the Master Gardener Training program manual.

In 2006, "Sisters in Health" curriculum was utilized for the nutrition education component. This was changed to "Mission Nutrition" in 2007. In 2008, due to budget cuts, meal preparation by the RECAP participants was incorporated into the program.

"...before this, my idea of cooking was going through the drive thru at McDonalds."

John.

"...I never knew where food came from. When I get out, I want to go to culinary school at [the tech-college]." Ebert.

Due to the varying literacy levels of the participants, information was delivered verbally by garden educators and volunteers.

Evaluation

Participation is tracked by recording number of visits to and time in the garden. Participant sex and race is recorded. Poundage of harvest is documented as well as its distribution. At the end of each session, the garden educator asked participants, "What have you learned today?" and comments were recorded.



Year	# Produce Raised	Distribution	# Program Participants:	Hours of Community Service
2006	9846 pounds total <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5385 pounds misc. produce donated to food pantries or utilized by county facilities 300+ pumpkins donated to youth fundraiser (Spotlight On Kids) 	20 % to county institutions 80 % to food pantries	47 Inmates <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 27 Male 16 Female 28 White 11 African American 1 American Indian 3 Latino 	797 hours of community service were provided by RECAP. Master Gardener Volunteer hours contributed 958 hours.
2007	7385 pounds misc. produce donated to food pantries or utilized by county facilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There was no pumpkin crop this season. 	10% to county institutions 90% to food pantries	54 Inmates <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 47 Male 7 Female 37 White 13 African American 4 Latino 	1357 hours of community service were provided by RECAP. No hours were reported by MGVs though they were present again in 2007.
2008	4300 pounds misc. produce donated to food pantries or utilized by county facilities (Inclement weather had a negative effect on the harvest this season)	5% to RECAP 95% to food pantries	44 Inmates <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 40 Male 4 female 30 White 13 African American 1 American Indian 1 Latino 	744 hours of community service were provided by RECAP. In 2008, the Garden was adopted into the weekly RECAP schedule, Wednesdays, 1pm to 4pm.

Summary

In 2006, in the midst of a \$4 million jail expansion discussion in Rock County, members of the UW-Extension Horticulture Team were awarded nominal funding from USDA to work with incarcerated individuals in garden related projects. UW-Extension educators from Milwaukee, Waukesha and Rock counties approached their local sheriff department to work cooperatively in this project. The following is a summary of the Rock County program.

Over the past 3 years 145 inmates have participated in this program, nearly 20,000 pounds of produce has been donated to food pantries, and over 3000 hours of community service has been provided.



The garden has become more than a place of vegetable production and mandatory community service. It is a safe place allowing for reflection and restoration of those participating; it is what horticulture therapy professionals refer to as a Healing Garden.

The garden creates a place of nurturing and caring—something which has been lacking in many inmates lives. Inmates have the opportunity to create success by planting, tending, and harvesting vegetables. Failure, when encountered, becomes a constructive learning experience; do not give up but replant and try again.

What the numbers don't reflect are the personal stories of those working in the garden. Participants often share stories of their life before incarceration—reflections on times in the garden with their grandfather, favorite recipes of their mother or what their kids could be doing.

They speak of their future; intended careers, going to school, or how they plan to improve their lives upon release. The garden gives a chance for introspection and personal reflection that hopefully translates into increased feelings of self worth, success and positive self image that will lead to reduced recidivism.

- Inmates can use their time in the garden as resumé material. Two inmates have requested a letter of reference from the UW-Extension horticulture educator to be used when applying for employment.
- On three occasions, a participant has returned to work in the garden after their release. In two of these cases, the individuals brought their children with them so they too could share in the positive experience of the garden.
- Some individuals begin the program guarded and unengaged in the work. Through the course of their weeks in the program, many evolve into active participation in the garden, taking leadership roles when working in small groups and taking responsibility for areas of the garden or specific garden duties.
- One individual found a honey locust tree seedling growing as a weed in the garden. When explained it was nothing more than a plant out of place and could be discarded, the individual transplanted the seedling into a pot and tended to it on his days working in the garden. It was his goal to take the tree with him upon release as a reminder of his time spent incarcerated.
- Latino inmates instructed non-Latino inmates how to eat hot peppers from the garden.
- An African American participant harvested and prepared a culturally unique lunch with recipes from his grandmother—collard greens, beet tops, and fried-green tomatoes.
- On several occasions, careers in horticulture were discussed.
- When paired with Master Gardener Volunteers, inmates have commented on people willingly volunteering for community service—it's not all mandated!
- Inmates had a noticeable, positive change in attitude after participating in the garden program as evidenced by comments from staff at the facility.



For the 2009 season, the garden has been incorporated as part of RECAP's weekly schedule. The value of this program is understood and appreciated by county staff, UW-Extension volunteers, and by the participants themselves, leading to a continuation of this program into 2009 as weekly scheduled activity.

Mike Maddox
Horticulture Educator
Rock County UW-Extension

Director of Education
Rotary Botanical Gardens