



Photos courtesy Oregon Department of Corrections

This three-quarter acre vegetable garden inside the walls of Oregon State Correctional Institute grew more than 30,000 pounds of food for the prison's kitchen in 2012 and donated 7,500 pounds to its local food bank.

# *Gardens Promote Sustainability and Growth in Oregon Prisons*

By Sarah Patterson

## Oregon's abundant resource of people dedicated to the sustainability movement provided momentum, first for the creation of gardens, and now for sustainability initiatives in the DOC.

**I**n 2012, the collective gardens of the Oregon Department of Corrections' (DOC) facilities grew 150,000 pounds of food and donated an additional 20,000 pounds to local food banks and charities. These gardens are sustained by volunteers who are recruited and trained by the Oregon nonprofit organization, Lettuce Grow Garden Foundation, which teaches and mentors inmate students and gardeners, as well as helps train Oregon DOC staff where necessary. The total square footage of the gardens is two acres inside prison walls; the smaller gardens span 6,000-7,000 square feet. Eastern Oregon Correctional in Pendleton has raised garden beds scattered throughout the spaces between dorms and walkways and has one of the largest yields.

Five years ago, there were several correctional facilities in Oregon that had small gardens, and several more that wanted them. Paul Stanley, an Oregon DOC corrections project manager who grew up on a farm, became a garden champion within the prison system. Stanley saw fallow land around prisons, idle inmates longing for something to do and hungry people at food banks, and wondered, "What's wrong with this picture?" He saw Lettuce Grow as a natural partner, and took his idea to the DOC's executive management team. The team slowly embraced the ideas as part of a long-term sustainability program.

### GARDENING AND EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

Lettuce Grow recruits volunteers, and provides grant and donation resources that are available to nonprofit organizations, but unavailable to government agencies. The organization had been working in five Western Oregon prisons between Salem and Portland since 2008, generating volunteers with gardening expertise to teach horticulture classes and to garden with inmates.

Lettuce Grow teamed up with Stanley to expand into more remote facilities at the edges of the state. Each year more facilities were added, and as of February 2013, Lettuce Grow now works with all but one state correctional facility.

Lettuce Grow partners with the Oregon State University (OSU) Extension Master Gardener™ program to offer sustainable gardening classes to inmates. Inmates who complete the Master Gardening course and pass the final exam earn a Certificate of Home Horticulture. These classes include Seed to Supper, a program that was created by the Oregon Food Bank (OFB). Ali Abbors, Learning Gardens program coordinator at OFB, describes the Seed to Supper program as:



An Oregon State Correctional Institute inmate crew works on its garden outside the facility walls. This garden harvested more than 21,000 pounds of produce, including potatoes, fruit, tomatoes and peppers, all of which was used in the institution.

*... A five-week, basic gardening class that gives novice adult gardeners the tools they need to successfully grow some of their own food on a limited budget. Volunteers support participants as they learn to plan, plant and harvest their own fresh garden produce. Through its innovative application of OFB's Seed to Supper curriculum, Lettuce Grow helps increase agricultural literacy, leadership capacity and community connectivity among participants. When they are released, these individuals are more likely to build positive connections in their communities.*

By the end of 2012, 54 inmates had completed the OSU Master Gardener™ 12-week training course and passed the final exam, earning a Certificate of Home Horticulture. This certificate is useful in Oregon's vast nursery, farm and winery industries. More than 100 inmates statewide signed up to take the class in January 2013.

Upon release, the students can register with local OSU state extension offices to complete the volunteer hours necessary to complete their official master gardener™ certification. "In 2012, for the very first time, inmates who take the course and pass the final exam can volunteer their time in one of our prisons to teach their fellow inmates about sustainable gardening," said Gail A. Langellotto, Ph.D., director of the Master Gardener™ program. "Volunteer hours are required to complete the certification. To our knowledge, this is the first program in the nation that has created a framework where inmates not only learn about gardening, but can volunteer their time teaching others, so that they can become certified master gardeners." It is becoming common for former inmates to visit OSU Extension offices around the state, asking how to complete their community garden volunteer hours to get this certification.

The class is provided in prisons on a DVD developed by OSU, administered through a partnership between Lettuce Grow and OSU and facilitated behind bars by Lettuce Grow. Lettuce Grow recruits volunteers to help lead discussions with the class, or works with willing correctional staff. Let-

tuce Grow corrects and processes exams under OSU supervision and then inmates receive Certificates of Home Horticulture from OSU. Lettuce Grow donates textbooks and notebooks with funding from a Perkins Grant.

After the DOC developed gardens in a few of its facilities, nonprofit and education sectors began stepping forward with expertise to expand training of inmate gardeners and biologists. These partnerships are paying big dividends, including fresh food for prison kitchens and donations to local food banks.

## CHALLENGES AND OUTCOMES OF GARDENING WITHIN PRISON WALLS

Garden procedures are a little different inside prison walls. For example, seed rows might be lined up with the guard tower rather than the sun. No corn or zucchini can be planted because inmates could hide behind it or lie under the leaves. Tomato stakes cannot be used because they could be used as weapons.

In spite of, or perhaps because of these challenges, the sustainability movement is slowly working its way into prison settings. Oregon is a key example of this vibrant growth, and the synergy of nonprofits working with corrections on these issues is palpable. Oregon's abundant resource of people dedicated to the sustainability movement provided momentum, first for the creation of gardens, and now for sustainability initiatives in the DOC.

Gardens in prisons are nothing new. Big prison farms with dairies and butcher shops were common, but are now gone as victims of circumstances that included litigation about unfair labor practices, corruption, pressure from the food industry and complaints of unfair competition. The sights, smells and values of farming faded from the corrections landscape in the 1970s and 1980s.

Lettuce Grow "harvested the seed" of this idea and enhanced it by contributing horticultural expertise, organic practices, integrated pest management ideas, seeds, soil supplements, and classes and books to train inmates to tend the gardens. It connected habitat restoration projects to the prisons through the nonprofit Applied Ecology Institute, growing an endangered species of lupine for an endangered butterfly. In the process, transformations happened.

"Our goal is to connect Oregon prison inmates with conservation and sustainability activities while teaching biological principles," said Tom Kaye, Ph.D., director of Applied Ecology Institute. "Starting with the Oregon State Correctional Institution in Salem, we're working with prison staff and inmates to grow endangered plants for use in conservation projects outside the prison walls. [We are] also working with the Oregon Youth Authority and Multnomah Education Service District to provide environmental education lessons to youths ages 12 to 24 at the Oak Creek Youth Correctional Facility in Albany, Ore., ... to grow native plants for habitat restoration projects."

Inmates taking classes became excited about things such as soil science and sustainability, discovering science for the first time in a setting that made it make sense. Most

inmates received scores between 90 and 95 percent on exams designed for a college freshman — even the inmates without GEDs.

Volunteers and speakers have been transformed by the contagious excitement of these inmate students. Volunteers welcome the opportunity to demonstrate sustainability concepts for this unlikely population. Staff and inmates had a unique opportunity for positive interaction. Institutions had emerging green spaces, which drew in birds and butterflies. Other inmates became curious about the garden plots they saw and how they impacted what showed up on their food trays. Waiting lists grew for classes.

Food service managers became more and more comfortable with using produce that did not come washed and wrapped in plastic. They learned how to look at last year's harvests and estimate the current year's needs, allowing them to better incorporate garden produce into their ordering plans. Little by little, gardens became the norm. Superintendents moved around and took with them positive garden experiences from their previous job placements. The department developed awards for green practices. It all grew like a garden — wild and unpredictable.

Many states do not allow prisons to grow food for inmate consumption. Some grow only for food bank donations. Oregon's model shows that all these needs can be served, with benefits to the taxpayer, the community, the inmates who learn a valuable skill, the staff and the administration in terms of pro-social activity and public relations. In one Oregon prison, the gardens grow produce for the Meals on Wheels program. There are direct benefits to local food banks that receive fresh produce from the prison gardens. Everyone eats better, and everyone benefits. The effect is profound, as demonstrated by this reflection from Justin Lester, an inmate at Oregon State Correctional Institute, and a garden volunteer in that facility:

*...When I step into the greenhouse ... it feels like I have left the tension of the prison atmosphere and stepped into a peaceful place ... as the plants mature and start to produce food that I helped grow. Some goes to my community here, some goes to my larger community through Lettuce Grow. I came into prison a self-centered teenager under mandatory minimum sentencing. When I rejoin the community here in Salem in about a year, I will have my associate degree from Chemeketa Community College, and will strive to be a valuable member of my community rather than taking away from it. The prison garden played a valuable role in helping me reshape the way I see the world.*



At Oregon State Correctional Institute in Salem, Lettuce Grow partnered with the nonprofit Applied Ecology Institute to bring in habitat restoration work. Here, inmates work with some of the 3,000 seeds from the endangered kinkaid's lupine, a flower that is the habitat for the endangered Fender's Blue Butterfly.

## NEXT STEPS

Stanley indicated that the next phase of the project will be to “identify DOC-owned tillable farmland for use by non-profits.” According to Stanley, the department will grow corn and squash on farmland that has been recently leased with water rights to Marion-Polk Food Share. “DOC is supplying inmate labor to help work the farmland and harvest the crops. An estimated 400,000 pounds of produce will be harvested from this land and donated to emergency food pantries throughout Oregon. A portion of the harvest will go to the department to supplement its institution food menus,” he said. “As the project moves forward, the department will enhance current partnerships and build new long-term alliances to help Oregonians in need, and to provide meaningful work opportunities and education for inmates.” The Sustainability in Prisons Project, funded by the National Science Foundation, brought many of Oregon's interested parties to a national conference at Evergreen College in Olympia, Wash., in September 2012. Tami Dohrman, assistant director of Oregon's DOC General Services Division, later found funding to hire a sustainability coordinator, Chad Naugle, who is hard at work developing a plan that incorporates all aspects of sustainability for the state's prisons.

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