

Prisons develop gardening programs to help inmates

By [Daniel J. Gross](#)
daniel.gross@shj.com

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Beneath the hot summer sun, a man convicted of voluntary manslaughter wiped sweat from his brow as he took a pair of pruning shears to a strawberry patch.

Another felon, convicted of murder, joined in a few minutes later. Together, they filled a basket with clippings and moved on to the next row of produce.

It's harvest season at Perry Correctional Institution, a maximum security penitentiary in Pelzer, where violent offenders are processing their summer crop to make way for the fall foliage.

"I would sleep right here in between these strawberries if I could," one of the inmates said. "This is the best therapy you could possibly have."

Prison gardens are growing across South Carolina Department of Corrections facilities as a means of rehabilitating inmates who are looking to better themselves. The horticulture program at Perry is touting its successes with inmates and food production, while a program at Tyger River Correctional Institution in Enoree is just now taking roots.

Inmates say they find that a little dirt on their fingertips gives them a renewed sense of self-worth. The inmates' transformation is spurring prison personnel to remind others to think twice about ruling them out.

"If I had known this when I was out there, it would've been different. I would've been planting instead of being around the wrong crowd," said another inmate at Perry, also convicted of murder, while potting cornstalk plants inside a greenhouse. "This teaches you the value of life. Not only of plant life but of human life as well, too, you know?"

State law doesn't protect identities of convicts, but SCDC has held to a policy not to disclose inmates' identities for the last several years, according to Clark Newsom, a spokesman for the agency. The policy aims to protect inmate safety while in prison and be sensitive to victims who may not want to see their offender in the media, Newsom said in an email.

The gardens are designed to give convicts a purpose while serving time, a skill for when they go back into society and a plethora of fresh ingredients to spice up a prison menu.

SCDC officials say inmates can choose to stay idle in a cell or find a way to pass the time through hard work. They say the latter option is one way to cut recidivism and give inmates a chance at success on the outside.



ALEX HICKS JR./alex.hicks@shj.com

Perry Correctional Institution in Pelzer has been growing its horticulture program for about eight years. About 20 inmates work the gardens each day to provide fresh produce for the penitentiary's cafeteria.

“That's how they want to do their time. That's their therapy, digging dirt, weeding out beds,” Perry's associate warden, Stephen Claytor, said. “These guys will work their tails off.”

Sprouting new roots

The production at Perry is considered the “gold standard” by other institutions across the state.

Perry broke ground on its ever-expanding garden project in 2009, though a basic “ground maintenance” program began not long after the facility opened in 1981. It was the second institution in the state to start such a program behind the Kirkland Correctional Institution in Columbia.

Now 17 facilities out of the 24 statewide have their own gardening programs including the Tyger River Correctional Institution in Enoree, which hired a horticulturist in July.

Robert Hill traveled from Enoree to Pelzer in July to tour the gardens there and learn their best practices to bring back to Spartanburg County. Hill is nearly starting from scratch at Tyger River, a medium security facility that holds about 1,300 inmates. He already has envisioned what the space will become by the fall.

“That'll be kale, then turnips, green cabbage and collard greens there,” Hill said, pointing to each patch of grass within the horticulture area.

Former staff had begun to garden using a plot of land on the penitentiary's south end, but the facility has never run a fully functioning horticulture program. Dry patches of dirt, some empty plant beds and a chipped paint sign that reads “Horticulture Garden” fill the current space. A shed on site houses some garden tools, but more will be needed, Hill said.

“It's going to be great,” he said. “There will be some trial and error but come this time next year, I promise you the cafeteria will be glad I came.”

A graduate of Jonesville High School, Hill came from the Union County Parks and Recreation Department, where he worked as a horticulturist. He obtained his associate degree in horticulture from Spartanburg Community College.

He said he was looking forward to gaining insight in Pelzer.

Perry holds about 800 inmates. Only about 20 participate in the horticulture program. Those who do are in charge of lawn maintenance, landscaping around the yard and producing fruits and vegetables to sell to the facility's Food Service Department. Whatever is harvested is added to the prison's menu so inmates can enjoy some locally grown flavors, said Clark Newsom, a spokesman for the Corrections Department.

Thousands of plants line several greenhouses, a large garden behind the basketball courts and an even larger garden in a plot of land nearby. There are special beds for cold-weather crops, drying racks for spices, herb gardens, potting areas for small trees that are sold to staff and even bee hives to harvest honey.

Cantaloupe, kiwi, avocados, Thai peppers, tomatillos and sweet potatoes are a few of the selections, which are ever-changing, said James Allen, Perry's horticulturist.

“We're always trying something new. There's always something new to learn,” Allen said.

Out of the 17 programs statewide, 12 provide fresh produce to the cafeterias, Newsom said. Since April 2013, about 95 tons of produce have been grown fresh on

the grounds of state prisons. There's also a variety of herbs and other produce donated to Food Service that is not considered in that total, Newsom said.

Apart from the horticulturists' salaries, which are paid by the state, the programs fund themselves and offer cost savings to the prison cafeterias. Food service departments purchase produce from the gardens to use for meals for the inmates. Produce used in the menus is bought for a discounted rate compared to what would be bought from a private source outside of the facility.

Staff at Perry said they are pleased with how the program has grown.

"It started with a rocky old rec field. And now we produce as many vegetables as we can," Claytor said.

Claytor has seen inmates transform themselves by doing something positive with their time in prison, even the ones that first came to the institution as a "stone cold convict," he said.

"There's some with life sentences with no parole that will still want to improve themselves," he said. "They don't want to live like an animal."

Common goals

Those inside prison walls find themselves there for different reasons. Some don't hide behind a wrong decision; others are eagerly awaiting an appeal. Some are distraught over a past association with the wrong crowd.

A man convicted of felony DUI spent a recent Wednesday afternoon shoveling loads of recycled sawdust into a compost pile that will in turn help provide nutrients to the plants being grown on site.

He said he would work the gardens seven days a week if the prison would allow it.

The inmates at Perry typically work 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, with intermittent water breaks under the hot summer sun. "It's a better way to spend your time than just staying idle," the 47-year-old man said, his shirt soaked in sweat. "I like the peace of mind."

He takes ownership of his garden. He harvested 1,038 pounds of onions, 300 watermelons, 32 rows of sweet potatoes and some cantaloupe last week, he said.

"He's special," Allen said of the inmate. "They all are in their own way."

The produce helps the man not dwell on the past, and yet he keeps his faults in perspective, he said.

The felony DUI involved him swerving onto oncoming traffic and ultimately killing a 3-year-old girl.

"I'm guilty of what it was, I don't argue. My father was killed by a drunk driver. ... I know the pain and agony the family was going through," he said, adding that he has grandchildren who were ages 2 and 4 at the time of the crash. "That's why the judge threw the book at me. He couldn't get under my skin. All I wanted to do was apologize to the family."

The man convicted of voluntary manslaughter working the strawberry patches said he's not a "career criminal" and he said he is determined to not let prison life corrupt him. "It was an accident, and it was what it was ... and I have to live with that for the rest of my life," the inmate said of his conviction. "For me, I never had a speeding ticket coming into this, so this is a whole new ballgame."

He said he takes pride in his gardening and is constantly writing letters to his two

daughters, ages 9 and 12, about what types of plants he grows.

"They're sharing things with me and I'll share this with them. I'll cut a leaf and I'll dry it and send it home ... It keeps me in their life," he said.

Tall metal fences lined with coils of barbed wire are hard to miss. The iconic prison structures are the backdrop to the acres of greens growing in South Carolina's red clay dirt.

Still, it beats staring at a cell wall all day, said an inmate convicted of murder who is serving a natural life sentence.

"I like the freedom of it. You don't feel locked up. Most of the inmates you meet are in the mindset of prison ... and it's not supposed to be like that. You're supposed to come and rehabilitate yourself."

The inmate said with a co-defendant coming forward with new testimony, he is hopeful he'll be exonerated.

Tyger River's associate warden, Laura Caldwell, said some inmates want to be proactive and focus on self-improvement rather than molding to the stereotypical prison culture. Some of them just need avenues to improve.

"If you can teach them to do the right thing in here, they can do the right thing out there," Caldwell said.

SCDC has a three-part mission: Safety, Service and Stewardship.

Tyger River Warden Tim Wiley said the service portion of the goal focuses on rehabilitation.

"There's a lot of talent locked up in prison," Riley said.

More freedom, but safety remains

If a tool is missing from an inmate, they're out of the program, Allen said.

It'll be another year before they can be considered to come back to it.

The tool shed at Perry, and the once-neglected one at Tyger River, have rows of tools lining the inside walls. Sharp shears, pitchforks, hoes, scissors and screw drivers are some of the tools used daily.

Apart from an inventory on paper, the walls have painted outlines of what tools should look like, to ensure none go missing.

No tool has been missing in Allen's time at Perry, he said. The only problem he's encountered was an inmate who is not a part of the horticulture program snuck up on someone gardening and stole their tool, he said. It was found days later.

Allen said working with inmates may present challenges to Hill, since they are not co-workers. "You don't have employees, you have an inmate population. You can't just have anybody," Allen said of the inmates he handpicks to work in the gardens and entrust with tools.

The metal, sometimes sharp tools, are necessary for effective gardening, Allen said, which is why he is meticulous about counting an inventory each morning and evening.

"In the hands of someone who wants to work, it's a good tool," he said, holding a hoe. "You give it to someone who has a different idea, then one shot could kill somebody."

When the equipment is used right, Allen likes to experiment with hydroponic gardening, cold-weather beds and fruits and vegetables not native to South Carolina or the United States. His inmates have made seasonings, hot sauce and many other non-traditional foods and additives not commonly associated with backyard gardening.

"We try to do a little bit of everything," Allen said.

Riley, during a recent tour of the Tyger River garden area, reminded Hill to always monitor the area. Look for gaps in fences or objects on the grounds in case contraband was thrown over the fence, he said.

Hill said he plans to enter the horticulture garden area by himself to scan the grounds before letting in a group of inmates.

Making the transition

Gardening isn't the only seed of hope planted inside prison walls.

About 180 inmates at Perry are a part of a "character-based unit," which provides enrichment and educational opportunities for those interested.

Classes on social values, respect, academic education and personal development are a few of the offerings inmates are exposed to if they join the program. There are also classes on computer skills, basic first-aid and writing classes.

"It's for men who have decided they do not want to live like convicts and prisoners," Claytor said. "It teaches peer accountability."

Through education and personal improvement options, institutions are now focusing on more than simply compliance.

"I can find compliant inmates. I want somebody who wants to do more than that," Claytor said. "Some don't want to get into the typical prison culture."

Perry also houses four dogs that inmates take care of and rehabilitate after they have had an abusive past. The dogs are used to provide therapy to inmates and can break them out of their shells, in a sense, Claytor said.

Tyger River boasts a SPICE program, or Self-Paced In-Class Education, which other state institutions have since adapted. The program provides classes and learning opportunities for 20 inmates at a time who take 18 weeks to complete the program.

Only about 7 percent of those completing the SPICE program while incarcerated find themselves back in an SCDC institution after they get out.

Recidivism across the state was at an average of 25.7 percent during fiscal year 2011, according to the Department of Corrections.

The Tyger River institution also partners with Anderson Hardwood Floors in that Tyger River has three production plants on site where inmates work a job to produce ready-to-ship, original hardwood flooring for the company. The job teaches them work ethic and pays them money into an account for exceeding certain quotas, allowing the inmates to pay restitution, child support or other financial obligations.

"We don't want to say, 'OK, you're out. Here's your bus ticket and we'll leave the light on for you,'" Caldwell said. "These are tools they need to make the transition."

The programs and work opportunities, Caldwell said, all tell a different story about prisons than what is found on television.

"If the prison system was anything like what you see on TV, none of us would be able

to make it to 25 years working here,” she said.

The Tyger River Correctional Institution won't be able to measure the true success of horticulture until Hill has a season or two under his belt, the staff said.

The 50-year-old wants to retire there, so he told Riley he'll give him 15 years of hard work, Hill said.

He said he's worked with inmates in a limited capacity through specific programs with the Union County Parks Department, but he's looking forward to being more hands-on with them. Testing the fertility of his soil, then growing those first batches of collards, cabbage and turnips will be the start to getting the grounds in good shape.

“Plants are like people. They need a little TLC,” Hill said. “If they happened to get off the path of life, maybe I can get them back on that path.”

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