

GreenHouse in the Big House: A Garden Behind Bars

By Jane Garmey

I have relinquished my driver's license and been issued a security pass. I am led through a succession of locked doors and dark passages. Then, having now lost all sense of direction, I am finally taken back outdoors. It is a beautiful day and I recoil from the intense sunlight. In front of me is a high chain-link fence topped by razor wire. A padlocked gate is opened and, lo and behold, I am in a two-acre garden.

It is delightful—filled with trees, shrubs, a butterfly border, an enclosed vegetable garden, and even a small rock-lined pond. Someone is weeding a flowerbed and others are trying to unclog and redirect the flow of a small waterfall. A large family of guinea hens meander over the grass; two rabbits, Bunny and Clyde, doze peacefully in their wooden hutch; Donald Duck (his companion, Daisy, having developed a bad case of bumble foot, has been moved elsewhere) is asleep under a Buddleia bush, while a group of parakeets in a nearby birdhouse (two of them a gift from a Russian barber in Queens) are engaged in what seems to be a serious bird tussle.

None of this would be the least bit out of the ordinary but for the fact that the men working in the garden are prison inmates and this garden is on Rikers Island. I am shown around by James Jiler, director of the GreenHouse Project at Rikers and author of "Doing Time in the Garden" (New Village Press). "GreenHouse" because, as Mr. Jiler explains, in winter and spring a large greenhouse in the far corner of the garden becomes the main locus of activity. Like most gardeners, he wants to show me everything—a living Christmas tree donated eight years ago and now 20 feet high, some cast-off specimens from the Parks Department native plant nursery that are now the backbone of his native woodland garden, and a huge nectarine tree grown from seed by a former inmate.

In summer, Mr. Jiler worries about how the plants survive hot weekends when no one is around to water them, and in winter he frets that intense fluctuations in temperature will wreak havoc on his germinating seeds. But one problem he does not have is lack of help! Five days a week, as many as 25 inmates (15 women and 10 men), working on separate shifts, spend up to seven hours a day in the garden, where they prune, weed, hoe, plant, harvest, and help care for the animals. They also repair to a large brick building that serves as a classroom. Here they learn about science, botany, horticultural terms and techniques, nutrition and herbs, and



A two-acre garden at Rikers Island is tended by a select group of inmates, who are then eligible for horticulture-related internships upon their release.

take a series of tests before completing the program. The recidivism rate of those in the program is 15% as compared to 65% of the general inmate population.

Mr. Jiler's right-hand aide is Hilda Krus, a soft-spoken horticultural therapist from Germany who is doing an internship before returning to her native country, where she would like to set up a similar program. Like Mr. Jiler, she knows all the inmates in the program on a first-name basis and tries as much as possible to work with them one-to-one. On the day I was at Rikers, she was demonstrating to a cheerful inmate named Hershey how to thin and prune an overgrown bush. Two other women were eagerly attacking a tangled mass of grape leaves choking another bush, while a third was harvesting a crop of ripe peppers. Plans were afoot to make a crab apple jelly recipe that Ms. Krus had found on a Web site—supposedly the very same recipe made by Martha Stewart when she was in prison, which delighted and amused the entire group. Getting to eat what one grows is one of the attractions of the program and a great way to escape what Hershey told me the inmates call "Fear Factor food."

In 1996, Anthony Smith became president of the Horticultural Society of New York. One of his first endeavors was to reopen an earlier GreenHouse program at Rikers Island that had been closed in 1993 when its funding under a Youth Services Grant had been terminated by the Giuliani administration. He enlisted the help of Mike Jacobson, a former colleague in city government and then commissioner of the New York City Department of Correction. Mr. Jacobson says that while he can't remember his initial reaction to the idea, it was probably along the lines of "Are you

insane?" Nevertheless, Mr. Smith kept talking, and the program got started in 1997.

Today, the Department of Correction makes available the two-acre outdoor space with its greenhouse and classroom building, covers the salaries of two corrections officers assigned to the garden, and provides transportation for the inmate participants who are housed in several different buildings on Rikers. The program, which costs less than \$250,000 a year, is run by the Horticultural Society of New York, which is responsible for finding the funding, provided by a variety of foundations and individuals.

Participants are recruited from inmates serving sentences of up to a year and must spend at least three to five months in the program. If they find they like working with plants, they are given the chance when they leave jail to take up paid internships in GreenTeam, a sister program also run by the Horticultural Society, where they receive further horticultural training and are helped to find full-time jobs in the field. There have been 330 graduates since the program began and of these 68 have received permanent horticulture-related jobs.

I met one such intern, William Rolle, on the day of my visit. Since he had done a tree-climbing course as part of his internship, Mr. Jiler had asked him to come back out to Rikers to assist with some tricky high tree pruning. That very afternoon, he was having an interview for a permanent job with a commercial landscape construction company and, like many job applicants, he was a little nervous and asked me to take a look at the résumé he would be taking with him. I learned later that he got the job—all the more valuable to him because it included medical coverage. As we drove back to Manhattan, I asked him what he had done before getting into the GreenHouse Project. "I never did anything," he replied. His kind of success story doesn't get headlines very often, but it's what makes this particular "jail to street" rehabilitation program all the more remarkable.

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Ms. Garmey writes on gardens and gardening for the Journal.