Five urban garden programs that train inmates and help communities

Prison gardening programs teach inmates valuable skills, reduce recidivism, and provide those in need with fresh produce.

By Emily Gilbert, Nourishing the Planet / March 2, 2012

Prisons receive billions of dollars each year in government funding, yet national recidivism rates continue to hover at around 66 percent. Following the economic recession, budgets have been slashed, forcing penitentiaries and post-release programs to cut spending.

Considered nonessential and expensive, garden programs are often the first to be cut, yet they have proven to be successful in not only reducing recidivism rates and improving rehabilitation, but also providing fresh healthy food to inmates and surrounding communities.
Today, Nourishing the Planet presents five innovative programs around the country that are proof of what gardening programs can accomplish.

1. **Sandusky County Jail Gardening Program**: Started in 2009, the 11,706-square-foot Sandusky County Jail garden in Ohio originally began as a way to cut costs and still provide food for the inmates. It soon became obvious, however, that beyond its economic benefit, inmates were provided with a program that taught them valuable life lessons and **career-building skills**.

   “They really learn a skill out of this,” program coordinator Jim Seaman said. “It gives them a sense of something that they have accomplished. Now they are starting to get a chance to taste their hard work.”

**Sandusky County Jail Garden in Action**: Sheriff Kyle Overmyer estimates that the program saved his department **more than $25,000** in 2009. Because the jail’s 1.5-acre garden sometimes produces more than the jail can use, he said the sheriff’s office donated about **375 pounds** of produce to local food pantries and soup kitchens in 2010. Producing pumpkins, raspberries, and other fruits and vegetables, the program has also raised hundreds of broiler chickens, all of which are consumed on site. “We raised 100 broilers last year [2010] and had 600 pounds of meat after.”

Further success can be seen in the lowered recidivism rate among inmates who participate in the program. According to Mr. Seaman, compared to the general Sandusky County Jail inmate population,
which has a recidivism rate of 40 percent, only 18 percent of inmates who participate in the garden program are rearrested.

2. **Roots to Re-entry**: Launched in 2006, the Roots to Re-Entry program is a partnership between the [Pennsylvania Horticulture Society](#), the City of [Philadelphia](#), and other private institutions around the city. The garden is tended by roughly two-dozen inmates for several hours during the week, providing seedlings and organic produce for community gardeners, local food pantries, and soup kitchens.

“We produce thousands and thousands of pounds of food for donation,” says Sharat Somashekara, city gardens coordinator for the [Pennsylvania Horticultural Society](#), which helped establish the program through its [Philadelphia Green](#) program. “Our whole garden is managed organically,” he adds. “We build the soil, we compost, we cover crop – we even make our own cayenne pepper spray [a natural pesticide].” The program gives inmates a chance to develop new skills, gain hands-on landscaping experience, and pursue meaningful employment upon their release.

Roots to Re-Entry participants receive 14 to 16 weeks of training, beginning with behavioral workshops at the prison provided by the Mayor’s Office of Re-integration Services for Ex-Offenders (RISE). Bartram’s Garden, an organization partner, provide inmates hands-on training to build practical skills and knowledge in the horticulture and gardening fields. This includes lessons on tools and equipment use, maintenance, safe practices, plant identification, and turf management.
**Roots to Re-entry in Action:** The Roots to Re-entry is unique in its level of integration with other environmental initiatives across the city. Besides teaching inmates job skills, the program has distributed 47,000 pounds of organic produce to *needy families*. Inmates have raised thousands of seedlings that are distributed to 42 community gardens participating in the Philadelphia Horticultural Society’s City Harvest program. The resulting produce is donated to local food pantries operated by a local nonprofit called *SHARE*, which gives the produce to low-income residents along with the Health Promotion Council, an organization that holds nutrition *education classes* for vulnerable and at-risk populations.

“It’s a beautiful thing to plant something and see it grow,” said inmate Larry Brand. “It makes me feel like I’m giving back for some of the things I did wrong.”

**3. GreenHouse:** Started in 1996, *GreenHouse* is a garden program designed to rehabilitate convicts in *Rikers Island* in *New York City*. With a greenhouse, a classroom, and over 2-1/2 acres of landscaped and productive gardens designed and built by inmates, participants receive applied skills, including woodworking and building planters, and job counseling from the *program*. Each year about 125 inmates participate in the program. Once released, GreenHouse offers 9- to 12-month paid internships as part of the Green Team, where individuals maintain gardens at public libraries and in other spaces throughout the city, earning *$7 to $10 an hour*. 
**GreenHouse in Action:** The recidivism rate for graduates of the program is 5 to 10 percent, compared to 65 percent for the general inmate population. Some GreenHouse alumni find permanent jobs with landscaping companies, receiving salaries as high as $30,000 per year. The Green Team has been an active organization in New York City bringing gardens to public schools all over the city. In 2009, the Green Team helped put a garden at the Walt Whitman Library in Brooklyn.

4. **Insight Garden Program:** Developed in 2003, and in collaboration with San Quentin State Prison in northern California, the Insight Garden Program (IGP) provides rehabilitation to self-selected prisoners through organic gardening. Inmates learn valuable life skills, including responsibility, discipline, mindfulness, and how to effectively work in a group setting.

The IGP’s classes include course curricula and hands-on experience in a 1,200-square-foot organic flower garden in San Quentin’s prison yard. Inmates learn about landscaping and gardening, developing practical skills in planting, irrigation, propagation, budgeting, and design. By working in an organic flower garden, participants develop an awareness of their impact on their social and natural environment.

**Insight Garden Program in Action:** A 2004 thesis written by a student from Pepperdine University found that the prison garden program was beneficial in several key ways, including providing focused activity, a sense of refuge, stress reduction, and a safe, neutral territory in an otherwise divisive prison yard.
Currently, **Planting Justice** teaches a course on urban permaculture and organic food production to the 30 men enrolled in the IGP course, involving inmates in the planning, design, implementation, and maintenance of their native plant and flower garden. In 2010, Planting Justice hired a former convict and participant in the garden.

5. **The Garden Project**: In 1982, while working at the San Francisco County Jail as an inmate counselor, Catherine Sneed and Sheriff Michael Hennessey began the Horticulture Project as a way to teach life lessons and skills to inmates through organic vegetable gardening. Recognizing the need for a program to help former offenders confront challenges and difficulties post-release, Catherine Sneed began **The Garden Project** in 1992 with a mission to provide job training and support to ex-inmates through counseling and assistance in continuing education. Since its inception, the Garden Project has become a flagship program for successful post-release rehabilitation and fostering positive relations with the communities from which convicts come.

Former inmates are employed at The Garden Project’s 12-acre organic farm, which includes a number of environmental maintenance and urban restoration projects. In addition to its career-building and counseling programs, the project also helps its employees attain their GED and attend courses at local community colleges. Food grown at the farm is donated to local food banks, helping seniors and families in local communities.

**The Garden Project in Action**: By 2002, the Garden Project had employed more than 4,300 ex-prisoners and served thousands of
incarcerated men and women, teaching them essential job and life skills and providing literacy courses and computer training. According to San Francisco County Sheriff Mike Hennessy, “The Garden Project is a tremendously effective crime-prevention program. It not only helps individuals rebuild their lives, but recidivism studies we’ve conducted also show that while 55 percent of our prisoners are rearrested within a year, those who go through the Garden Project have a recidivism rate of 24 percent, and that’s after two years.”

The Garden Project has expanded its assistance programs outside US borders. Since 2008, the Garden Project has helped local gardening programs in rural India by coordinating seed donations.