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Expanding Horticultural Training into the Prison Population

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Expanding Horticultural Training into the Prison Population

Abstract

This article addresses positive and negative aspects of teaching horticulture to underserved prison populations. The southern Nevada master gardener curriculum was adapted to a concentration on job-readiness. Curriculum is only part of the challenge of working with this clientele. A number of problems and challenges arise with prison administration at all levels. We address the evolution of curriculum to meet the needs of each type of facility and institutional challenges so that the Horticultural Training Program can make a positive impact on individuals and communities.

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Introduction

Since 1998, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE) faculty members have taught horticulture to inmates of southern Nevada correctional facilities. The correctional horticultural program has been presented at three medium security prisons, a trustee camp, the county detention center, and the federal prison camp located on Nellis Air Force Base. Once inmates have passed the horticultural training program, they may take the state pesticide applicator training (PAT) and examination, which prepares them for jobs after release. During the years the program has been in existence, 46 inmates passed the PAT examination, and nearly 300 inmates passed basic horticultural training.

Why Establish a Corrections Horticulture Program?

Horticultural training can benefit a prison or prison system in many ways:

- Provide a distraction for prisoners,
- Provide a constructive way for prisoners to use their creative abilities while incarcerated and after release,
- Provide a trained population for labor in the prison,
- Provide prisons with opportunities to offer job training,
- Provide training at no cost to the prisons, and
- Create a system of community service within the prison.

For many prisoners, completing the training program is their first educational accomplishment. Some report that because of this training they enrolled in college after leaving the prison system. The incarcerated population is growing. The total prison and jail population reached 2,258,983 by

the end of 2006, representing 0.7% of the US population (Sabol, Couture, & Harrison, 2007). From 1995 to 2000, the prison population increased by 17%, while educational programming increased by only 1%. Any program that can lower recidivism is essential. Due to the nature of their crimes, many inmates cannot return to previous professions. This is especially true of prisoners who commit white-collar crimes. These inmates need new avenues for employment to make a legal living. Horticultural training provides an opportunity to change attitudes and life goals.

Project Beginnings and Development

The southern Nevada horticultural training began 8 years ago in one prison as an extension of the Master Gardener Program. As the program expanded to other facilities, it became apparent that it needed to be adapted toward job-skills training (O'Callaghan & Robinson, 2006). This program is one of the most popular programs at the prisons. It receives strong support from prisoners. Some inmates have been on a waiting list for 2 years. One of the prisons has a waiting list of over 100. In one prison, inmates posted their own Intranet Web page advertising upcoming classes. Requirements for enrollment are stringent, yet prisoners meet them. Our program currently includes the county jail, three state prisons, and one prison camp. The federal camp at Nellis Air Force Base (now closed) and one privately run prison, which has since been taken over by the state, were previously involved.

Expedite the Program

Regulations differ among facilities. Although there are many similarities, each has different rules governing such issues as who can enter, what color clothing may be worn, types of books permitted, etc. Rules may be administrative code or may be a warden's preference. Following are lessons we have learned that help expedite the program.

- Get regulations in writing to avoid conflicts with institutional staff.
- Realize that corrections systems often require training for volunteers.
- Know the rules of each correctional institution and abide by them strictly.
- Obtain buy-in from the highest-ranking authority possible in the system, and then within the prison itself.
- Carry documentation for permission to enter the facility.
- If possible obtain an institutional photo ID and copies of all paper work showing what can be brought into the prison.
- Always have the warden's and assistant warden's number on speed dial in case difficulties arise.
- Keep TB tests up-to-date.
- Prepare an outline of classes for administrators, or better yet, design a professionally printer brochure about the program. This also helps sell the program to other institutions and funding source.
- Treat inmates with respect but never become friends with them. Some, if not all, will try to manipulate friendship.
- Do not ask students what crime they committed.
- If inmates do not show respect and participate, as they should, take them out of the program. Others will gladly take the spot.

Program Challenges

Working with the corrections system can be challenging. Not all inmates take the course for educational or employment reasons. Some only take courses to receive time off their sentences for completing an educational program. Employee turnover in the prison system is high, and many times morale is low, even lower than among inmates. Not everyone within a prison will welcome a training program no matter how valuable it may be. This is especially true among people who believe that prisons exist only to punish and that educational programs are an unnecessary luxury.

Conclusion

Expanding a horticultural program into a prison can benefit individuals and prison systems in a variety of ways, opening doors to individual self-improvement and organizational community service. Any effort required to begin and expedite the program will be worth time spent and aggravations endured.

Plan for the unexpected, such as emergencies in the yard, no officers to escort instructors, problems with paperwork, etc. Be flexible because the program can change lives. Many inmates report this class makes them feel they have potential and gives them something to look forward to after incarceration. For some, this is the first time they have received any kind of certificate showing they have completed a course and can now give back to the community in a meaningful way.

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