

# Pacific Northwest's Sustainability in Prisons Project

By Patty Cassidy, MA, HTR  
Photos: B. Drummond

Four Washington state prisons are part of the Sustainability in Prisons Project “that links scientists and conservation specialists with a non-traditional audience – incarcerated offenders.” Beginning in 2002 when (then) Washington Governor Gary Locke put out a directive “to enhance the sustainability of its prisons by conserving energy and water, limiting and recycling waste and constructing green facilities,” the link to nature was established within this corrections system. Some of the sustainability activities

Today, Cedar Creek can boast about a reduced carbon footprint as it recycles water, most of its garbage, and other waste. With efficient composting and worm-raising systems, offenders are part of the sustainability effort and feel satisfaction from their work. Considered members of a “work camp,” the male inmates at this minimum security facility have four years or less remaining on their sentence, are required to work in one of the many diverse programs that are intended to prepare them for rejoining



and programs might be considered vocational horticulture, one of the horticultural therapy program types defined by the American Horticultural Therapy Association (AHTA). As such, the Sustainability in Prisons Project is an interesting model to look at both in this article and as a scheduled pre-conference tour at the 2012 AHTA annual conference.

Cedar Creek Correctional Center (CCCC), at first sight is not your average prison with its remote, 38 acres of land among firs and streams with wooded hills. It is the brightest beacon in the Washington Department of Corrections system, in large part because of its partnering with faculty and staff from Olympia's The Evergreen State College (TESC). In 2004, a forest ecologist and teacher at TESC, Dr. Nalini Nadkarni, had the vision to recruit several Cedar Creek offenders and staff and several Evergreen students for an initial program called the Moss-in-Prison Project. Based on the success of that program, other ecological and biodiversity research projects were conducted at CCCC with college students, community partners, and offenders working together. Soon a lecture series was designed for the inmates through which they learned about hydrology, wildlife ecology, and gardening. Consequently, ideas flourished about how to fashion CCCC and the other prisons in the system into more cost-effective and “green” facilities which included horticulture programs.

society as productive citizens, and are enthusiastic about their contributions and successes. The bounty the inmates produce from their farming, beekeeping and greenhouse tasks, provides the facility with fresh, organic fruits and vegetables and allows them to donate excess harvests to community food banks. Every available piece of land without a building was a dedicated garden or was targeted to be the new pumpkin patch or orchard.

The inmates were knowledgeable and resourceful, and seemed genuinely content with their lot, speaking repeatedly of their work at the prison being “our way of giving back.” Horticultural therapy practitioners might consider visiting Cedar Creek Correctional Center in person during the AHTA conference pre-tours next October.

## Other Resources

[blogs.evergreen.edu/sustainableprisons/press-room/](https://blogs.evergreen.edu/sustainableprisons/press-room/)  
<http://www.doc.wa.gov/sustainability/>

*Patty Cassidy, MA, HTR lives in Portland, Oregon and is on the 2012 Annual Conference committee. As part of the conference planning, she visited the Cedar Creek Correctional Center and was intrigued to find an innovative program and facility which provides new applications of vocational horticulture and sustainable practices integrated together.*