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## Blooms Behind Bars: Urban Gardening and Sustainability in American Prisons

November 7, 2013 by [Christine Cube](#)



*Prison garden. Photo by Benj Drummond and Sara Joy Steele.*

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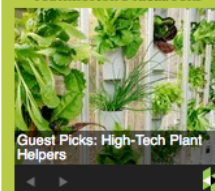
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When you think of [urban gardens](#), you probably don't picture prisons. But there's a new trend in urban gardening, and prisons across the United States are climbing on board.



*SPP conservation nursery. Photo by Benj Drummond and Sara Joy Steele.*

Dozens of corrections facilities are building organic prison gardens, [composting](#) and [recycling](#) prison waste, and harvesting produce to serve both the prison kitchens and local food banks. It's sustainability built on teamwork and the dedication of volunteers in an effort to give these inmates a chance—and it's growing.

So far, there are “green” prisons in a number of states including California, Oregon, Washington, Ohio, Maryland, Michigan, New Mexico, and [New York](#).



*SPP greenhouse. Photo by Benj Drummond and Sara Joy Steele.*

The common thread is the [Sustainability in Prisons Project](#), a program born in Washington's Evergreen State College.

SPP reports that one prison system out west is saving more than \$260,000 annually in food waste carting fees while simultaneously preventing thousands of tons of garbage destined for landfills.



*Inmate in the Coffee Creek garden. Photo by John Valls.*

### **Gardening at One Prison at a Time**

Coffee Creek Correctional Facility uses 2,000 pounds of composted food waste a week to fertilize a prison vegetable garden, and it has a greenhouse tended by inmates. Coffee Creek is the only prison for women in the state of Oregon, and it houses 1,200 inmates.

The original garden was a teeny plot in an area that mostly was inaccessible to inmates. It's since doubled in size and moved into a minimum security facility where roughly half of the prison population resides.



*The Coffee Creek garden. Photo by John Valls.*

Debbie Rutt, who helps manage the garden program, says at any one time, Coffee Creek has 10 full-time gardeners/inmates working in the prison garden. The prison also holds gardening classes and this year has engaged 75 inmates in classes related to gardening and sustainability. (Rutt is a fellow of Audubon's Toyota Together Green program, and her work has been supported by grants through the program as well as by private foundations and local government.)

"The response has been overwhelming," said Rutt, who grew up in southern Oregon and teaches community service at Portland State University. "When we started, we thought it could be more of a vocational thing, but it really has transformed the institution. The garden is appreciated by inmates and staff."

#### **"Prisons are a Society"**

All 12 Washington state prisons and roughly 10 other sites there are part of the Sustainability in Prisons Project network, says Joslyn Rose Trivett, SPP network manager.



*SPP conservation nursery. Photo by Benj Drummond and Sara Joy Steele.*

Each program is unique to the state and prison. A lot of it is based on the culture of the specific facility.

“It’s all custom,” Trivett said. “Prisons are a society and this is an opportunity to figure out making the society sustainable.”

SPP has five essential components that allow its model to be highly adaptable at prisons across the country:

- Partnerships, where there’s benefits to everyone involved.
- Bringing nature inside. This could be anything from dogs brought in through a rehab program, bringing in houseplants and/or gardens into a prison.
- Education. Even if it’s, say, an inmate sorting garbage, it’s about learning why they’re sorting and where this product can end up.
- Safe and sustainable operations. The idea is working toward reducing the footprint of the prison and making sure it’s not putting the prison at any risk.

- Keeping track of what you're doing, evaluating, and sharing it with other facilities to promote shared learning from experience.

### **Sustainability for Future Generations**



Bill Merritt was coming back from a fishing trip in Alaska last fall, when his boss contacted him to about a Seattle SPP conference he might be interested in attending.

Merritt, executive director of environmental compliance, safety and emergency operations for the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, dropped into the SPP conference and came back with some solid ideas for different projects across the state.



*Coffee Creek garden. Photo by John Valls.*

Today, Merritt manages and oversees all the green prison initiatives for the department.

He rattled off a few:

- A partnership with the University of Maryland, Baltimore County to study plant propagation and what grows naturally in urban vs. rural environments: The program is going to be teaching inmates data, lab, and gardening skills. Inmates also will plant fruits and vegetables at these sites and harvest for local food banks.
- Greenhouse facilities in Cumberland and Hagerstown, where inmates work: Many are working toward master gardener certifications at these locations.
- Moving a huge greenhouse into a medium security facility in Hagerstown: There also are four acres there, where inmates grow tomatoes and peppers that mostly go to local food banks. Starting next year, the facility hopes to plug vegetables produced there into the dietary stream of the inmates.
- The old Maryland Penitentiary, today known as the Maryland Metropolitan Transition Center in Baltimore City: This is the oldest, continuously operated prison in the Western Hemisphere. Inside the walls, the department just built a 20-foot by 40-foot greenhouse to grow plants, fruits and vegetables. Merritt said the agency is working with Baltimore Orchard Project to teach inmates how to do grafting onto rootstock and development of fruit and nut trees from the seed level up. This is going to give inmates a useable skill, he said.



*SPP prison greenhouse. Photo by Benj Drummond and Sara Joy Steele.*

All of this adds up to important work.

“It gives inmates jobs, and it teaches them skills,” Merritt said. “A big part of what we try to do is educate inmates so when they leave our custody, they have a usable skill they can be proud of and do. An inmate that is kept busy and occupied during their time in has less time to get into trouble. That also keeps employees safer. In addition, we really do try to provide a greener lifestyle.”

*Christine Cube is the DC correspondent for Urban Gardens. Follow Christine [@cpcube](#).*