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The Trailblazer: Maine State Prison teaches inmates to garden, compost, recycle

Their work on the prison's sustainability initiative earns Capt. Ryan Fries and Mark Hutchinson the Source Award for Trailblazer.

BY MEREDITH GOAD STAFF WRITER

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Ryan Fries, a captain at Maine State Prison in Warren, in a greenhouse where inmates work raising plants. *Staff photo by Ben McCanna*

Teaching inmates at the Maine State Prison in Warren how to garden has brought Mark Hutchinson, a University of Maine Cooperative Extension professor, some special challenges.

<https://www.pressherald.com/2018/03/18/prisoners-grow-vegetables-walk-a-new-path/>

Sharp objects are prohibited in the prison, but how do you teach a pruning class without pruning shears? How do you teach tillage without any equipment? Hutchinson's students at the prison dissect flowers in their botany class with their fingernails instead of knives or tweezers, and they use plastic magnifying

"It can be done," Hutchinson has learned. "It just takes a little bit of thought and creativity."

The results are worth it. Through a new sustainability initiative, overseen by the prison's Capt. Ryan Fries and Hutchinson, inmates compost, recycle, grow vegetables and manage beehives. These programs have saved the prison money, given the inmates job training, and helped them cope with past traumas as well as the restrictions of prison life.

The prison's 1,015 inmates generate about 228 tons of compostable food waste each year, along with 58 tons of recyclable paper and plastic, 47 tons of cardboard, and lots of metals and cans, according to Fries. The compost is returned to the prison's two acres of vegetable gardens, while a recycling program saves taxpayers \$90,000 a year in trash disposal fees.



Mark Hutchinson, left, with Warden Randall Liberty at the prison. Photo courtesy of the University of Maine

The inmates now grow all of their own vegetables – 8,500 pounds' worth annually – which saves the prison \$8,000 in food costs. An additional 1,200 pounds of inmate-grown produce is donated annually to a local food pantry.

Gardening programs are common in U.S. prisons, according to Kelli Bush, co-director of the

Sustainability in Prisons Project at Evergreen State University in Washington. Composting and beekeeping are newer, but gaining ground.

“Maine definitely stands out as a state that’s doing really great work around this topic,” she said.

That is why Fries and Hutchinson are the winners of the Source Trailblazer Award.

The Maine State Prison has had a greenhouse for 15 years, but for most of that time it housed flowers. Prison officials worried that if inmates could grow fruits and vegetables, they’d steal the produce to make liquor in their cells, Hutchinson said.

“When you’re in that environment, there are all kinds of things that they think about that we don’t,” Hutchinson said, “but Warden (Randall) Liberty said ‘No, that’s the least of our problems. The benefits outweigh the negatives.’ So he’s turned a lot of the ground that was in ornamentals into food production.”

Fifteen inmates have been hired – these are counted as prison jobs – to operate the greenhouse, grow seedlings, tend crops and compost food waste. Their experience varies widely: One inmate has a four-year degree in horticulture, while others have never picked up a shovel before. Each has his own reasons to garden, Fries said: “We have some who just enjoy being out of the pod and being able to do something constructive. They’re able to work with their hands, be outside, enjoy the weather, and not being confined. And then there are others who do it strictly to give back to the facility by putting vegetables inside the chow halls so we have better salads. Fresh vegetables always taste better than store-bought.”

The crops include green beans, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, “and a whole bunch of lettuce,” Fries said.

Three months ago, the prison launched Master Gardener training taught by Hutchinson and his Cooperative Extension colleagues. Each inmate who goes through the rigorous 80-hour training will become a certified master gardener and must donate 40 hours’ volunteer work producing vegetables for the midcoast community.

The inmates, Fries said, “were all excited about it. We had almost 60 applications for the first training, and people are already asking for the next one.”

Fries said the inmates hope the program will help them land a job when they are released; they also see it as a way to “maybe keep them on the right path.” One inmate who is scheduled to be released in 10 weeks plans to apply for a job at a greenhouse in his hometown.

Both Fries and Hutchinson say they’ve seen changes in inmates’ personalities as they work in these coveted jobs, and it’s led to better behavior on the inside.

“It gives them a reason to get out of bed in the morning, and it gives them something to look forward to in the day,” Hutchinson said. “Anytime you get your hands in the dirt and work in the soil, I think that’s therapeutic environment for them to be in.”

The gardening program appears to have helped inmates who suffer from post-traumatic stress – so much so that Liberty is planning a gardening area earmarked for 47 inmates who are veterans.

“A lot of research” supports the idea that gardening and interacting with nature help people deal with past trauma, Bush says.

“Education should always be a component of these (sustainability) programs,” she said. “Education is the most effective way to reduce recidivism, and the research shows that.”

Liberty confirms that. He believes that simply warehousing prisoners does not work, and programs like the sustainability initiative at the Maine State Prison will help inmates re-enter society and stay out of prison.

The program grows vegetables, but also cultivates hope and sprouts futures.

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