




Follow



HOME STORIES VIDEO PODCASTS CURRENT ISSUE ABOUT | MAGAZINE 



The Planet Magazine   
Dec 12, 2017 · 5 min read

## THE GATED GARDEN

Inmates at the Washington Corrections Center in Shelton, Washington, participate in environmental education as a part of the Sustainability in Prisons Project.

*Story by Jonathan Flynn | Photos by Greta Lozada*



Inmates at the Washington Corrections Center in Shelton, Washington, work in greenhouses and garden beds as a part of the Sustainability in Prisons Project.

*Robert Ostaszewski walks over to the hives, grass crunching underfoot in the misty morning. He kneels, noticing a bee flipped over on its back. Gently, he reaches for it and allows it to latch onto his finger. He slowly lifts the bee into the air and*

<https://theplanetmagazine.net/the-gated-garden-a27e1d338f9e>

*watches it fly away. Ostaszewski is an apprentice beekeeper, but unlike the bee, he cannot leave. Ostaszewski is incarcerated.*

**O**STASZEWSKI IS A teaching assistant in the beekeeping program at the Washington Corrections Center in Shelton, Washington. The Sustainability in Prisons Project was founded in 2003 as a partnership between the Evergreen State College and the Washington State Department of Corrections. Together, they designed a model of environmental education and nature therapy for inmates. Since then, the project has established programs in all 12 prisons in Washington. They want to provide inmates like Ostaszewski with the skills necessary to be employable in a developing green economy.



A sign near the beehives reads "Intensive Bee Management Unit"—a play on the language of the prison system.

At the Shelton prison, watchtowers loom in the distance. As inmates move across the compound, they navigate through a barbed-wire maze of fences and gates patrolled by armed guards. However, no officer patrols the beekeeping enclosure. Instead of a badge, the inmates are greeted by a sign with a cartoon bee and bright-yellow letters reading, "Intensive Bee Management Unit." The bees are kept in a white box beneath a shelter an inmate construction crew built. As bees buzz in and out of the boxes, Ostaszewski's beekeeping partner explains how the little insects form themselves into a sphere, slowly circulating from the inside out to keep warm in the crisp morning. In addition to beekeeping, inmates can receive

vocational training in carpentry and technical work by working in the facility's steam plant.

“When you send an inmate out after they've taken these courses, they can sustain themselves,” Ostaszewski said. “They don't have to rely on government stuff and they don't have to worry about taking care of their families because they have the skills to do that and to put a roof over their heads.”

In 2013, almost a quarter of Washington state inmates reoffended within their first year of release, according to a 2014 study by the Council of State Governments Justice Center, a New York-based think tank. In 2015, approximately 3,660 inmates held sustainability jobs within Washington prisons—nearly 19 percent of the total incarcerated population in the state, according to SPP's 2016 annual report.

The prison pays inmates a base rate of 35 cents per hour for various jobs, said Gina Bryan, the liaison to the beekeeping program. A typical beekeeping certification course would have cost each inmate \$25, but help from SPP has been able to bring the cost down to \$5, she said.

Beekeeping isn't the only sustainability program at the corrections center. Last year, the inmates grew more than 13,600 kilograms of produce in the prison's gardens and donated it in Mason and Thurston counties.

Adjacent to the beekeeping enclosure sits a garden of blue violets. Although the shrub is small and delicate, this native species provides a biologically-unique habitat for one endangered organism: the Oregon silverspot butterfly. The blue violet is virtually the only habitat where the butterfly may develop during the larval stage. Morris Talaga, an inmate and teaching assistant in the program, clutches his notebook and walks over to the edge of a flower bed filled with withered shrubs.

“These are very important plants,” Talaga says. He displays a few tiny violet seeds in his big, weathered hand. “You could literally put five plants in front of [the silverspot butterfly], and these are the only plants that it will come to.”

The Center for Natural Lands Management, a California-based nonprofit that manages conservation land, partnered with the sustainability project to cultivate these species of violets, said Carl Elliot, the staff manager of the violet program. It's not an easy task. If the pods containing the seeds are not harvested within a few hours of becoming ripe, they will burst and shoot seeds across the garden, making them nearly impossible to collect. As a result, the violets must be monitored closely



and handpicked daily by the inmate crew. The inmates have harvested about four times the amount of violet seeds compared to the federal Natural Resource Conservation Service. The service now relies solely on the inmates for seed production, Elliot said.



Morris Talaga, a teaching assistant in the program, bends down to pick up a piece of the violet plants growing at the prison. These violet plants provide a crucial habitat for the silverspot butterfly.

A program like the sustainability project cannot be considered sustainable if it offers green-collar training for inmates without a rehabilitative element, according to a 2014 study published in *Geographica Helvetica*, a Swiss geography journal. To address this, activities such as gardening and beekeeping double as opportunities for inmates to develop teamwork skills and a sense of stewardship.

Inmates who participate in horticultural therapy have an easier time re entering society after incarceration, as long as they receive transitional support after release, a 1998 study in the *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* found. Additionally, offenders are less likely to return to prison if they find employment after release, according to a 2012 study in the *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*.



*Robert Ostaszewski, a beehive expert, explains how the bees are currently dormant.*

Their programs have succeeded in reducing the environmental impact of the prisons, including an overall decrease of energy use and waste generation, according to SPP's 2016 financial report. The program does not have data on the recidivism rates of inmates who participated in their program.

As Ostaszewski serves out the rest of his sentence, he can continue to instruct new inmates as they, too, become beekeeping apprentices. He said he would like to become a farmer with his wife when he is released.

"I'm just chomping at the bit to get out," he said. Ostaszewski believes he will get to leave the prison in 2025.

conservation while restoring native violet populations. When released, Talaga said he would like to help his parents take care of their garden.

Talaga can continue teaching fellow inmates about the importance of

"It's giving back to society," he said. "I really believe that I'm helping with that, and it's a good thing for me."

- [The Planet](#)
- [Jonathan Flynn](#)
- [Greta Lozada](#)
- [Feature](#)