

# UMBC initiative recruits inmates to spruce up vacant lots in West Baltimore



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The Baltimore Sun

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Initiative offers cost-efficient means to beautify vacant lots.

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**K**enneth Favors could be getting out of prison within a few years, but he's already doing something on the "outside," helping beautify open spaces in Baltimore.

Favors is one of eight inmates at a Baltimore transition center involved in an initiative to make green space out of eight Harlem Park vacant lots with wildflowers and grasses cultivated behind bars — and at the same time learn gardening and horticulture skills they might use once released.

That's the aim of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and city and state officials. They partnered to launch the Maryland Green Prisons Initiative to come up with cost-efficient ways to revegetate vacant lots while studying urban ecosystems.

The Baltimore Office of Sustainability and UMBC have targeted the blighted West Baltimore neighborhood, planting signs about the initiative along abandoned swaths of land, then clearing strewn debris. The Baltimore City Correctional Center has supplied the human capital — inmates who are taking a weekly two-hour course in horticulture that includes one hour of study and one hour of hands-on gardening.

For Favors, of Silver Spring, watching the seed-to-plant process has been something to marvel. The end result, he said, made him as proud as a father watching his child go off to the first day of school.

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-umbc-green-prisons-20150407-story.html>

"My mother used to plant flowers and stuff in front of the house and she always asked me to help and I was never really interested," said Favors, who officials said is in prison for drug offenses. "But now it's interesting to learn about it and I want to learn more."

Chris Swan, a UMBC professor of geography and environmental science who is leading the project, said the initiative will likely beautify about two dozen vacant lots. Citing city government data, he said about 14,000 vacant lots exist in Baltimore.

The effort has not only beautified lots in West Baltimore, but it's enlivened what state officials say is the oldest operating penal institution in the Western world. On prison grounds that once housed a basketball court, inmates have built a hoop house —a form of greenhouse — as well as a compost station and plots for potted plants and vegetables they've planted on their own.

The operation has all the trappings of a backyard garden surrounded by weather-beaten walls and encircled with high fences and coiled razor wire.

"One of the goals of the project is to bring nature into the prison," Swan said. "Cities all over the place are having a problem with vacant land and what to do with it. The Baltimore Office of Sustainability has goals and we try to help them meet them by having inmates help out as a human resource in order to make that happen."

Felicia Hinton, director of corrections for the central region at the state Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, said inmates taking part in Green Prisons must have at least an eighth-grade education, some math proficiency and good handwriting for taking research notes. Those serving for sex offenses are ineligible for the program.

Said Hinton, "When we talk to them about being participants, we tell them, 'Even if you don't go out into the community and find a job [in gardening] this would be an opportunity for you to learn a skill that will allow you to feed your family on a small plot of land. You could take an empty square in the sidewalk in front of the home and create a garden that can help sustain the whole neighborhood.'"

Damien Dmitruk, an inmate from Baltimore, agreed as he offered a guided tour along the grounds where the first stems of plants and vegetables are sprouting.

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"I don't know if I can do this as a profession, but one thing I can say is that at least I can do it as a hobby," said Dmitruk, who officials said is in prison on robbery charges. "I would have the knowledge and know what to do in my own personal garden, grow some vegetables, help my girlfriend in front of the house with flowers, things like that.

"I do enjoy it," he said. "I enjoy it a lot more than I thought it would."

Some of the inmates say they had scant gardening knowledge before taking the course. "I took horticulture in high school and I helped my grandma out in her garden," said Zachary Barger, an inmate from Parkville who officials said is in prison on theft charges. "But pretty much I'm learning new stuff, stuff they didn't teach me in high school, about fertilizers and the insects."

The horticulture course was organized by Patricia Foster, a master gardener at the University of Maryland Extension's Baltimore office. "Basically they're taking part in a master gardener lite program," said Foster. "One of the things I think is particularly beneficial is the hands-on learning part of this. What they're seeing is the lectures in practice."

For the inmates, that's sometimes considerable information to digest, but they don't seem to mind.

Said Dmitruk, "We have a lot of spare time."