

Food & Drink | Garden | Life | Lifestyle

GRACE Garden Project gives inmates a chance to grow

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A Kitsap County project gets inmates' hands dirty while giving them a new sense of hope — and all the produce goes to food banks.

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LAURA'S ESPECIALLY PROUD of the pumpkins. Five different kinds loll about in a sizable plot, looking picturesque alongside the road at the GRACE Garden Project in Kitsap County, not far from Seattle. "I didn't even know there was one called a ghost pumpkin that grows solid white," she says. "And then a knobhead pumpkin — a pumpkin with big knobs on it. I'm like, 'What?!'" Laura laughs. Now she's growing them.

More photos available at <https://www.seattletimes.com/life/food-drink/grace-garden-project-gives-inmates-a-chance-to-grow/>



She's one of a half-dozen inmates from the Mission Creek Corrections Center for Women out tending the garden on this breezy, ideal end-of-summer day. Crews from Mission Creek do all the planting, weeding, harvesting and more here, under the auspices of [the Kitsap Conservation District](#). Their work looks sublime in the sunshine — rows and rows as lush as can be, with all kinds of just-picked vegetables looking ready for Instagram at the fanciest farmers market. Instead, today's 271-pound harvest will go in a van directly to the Central Kitsap Food Bank, part of the nearly 7,000 pounds of as-fresh-as-possible produce GRACE has donated in 2018.

Laura's standing in the dirt near tidy rows of verdant broccoli, wearing her Mission Creek-issued red sweatshirt, khaki pants and work boots. Some of the women have "MCCCW" inscribed in permanent ink down one pants leg; an armed guard with a uniform of her own



is never far. The broccoli grows with multiple heads on one stalk, "almost like a honeycomb," Laura was surprised to learn. "If you don't take them back, then you're just going to have a conglomeration of broccoli," she warns. "And they get so big! They are *huge*." She loves broccoli now — the inmates aren't

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supposed to eat anything here except the boxed lunches they bring, but some overflow produce goes back to the facility, and out here, “the other way gets looked sometimes,” as one of them puts it.

What Laura doesn’t love: the bugs. “They’re gross!” she laughs, especially the earwigs, which “love to live under a head of lettuce.”

Addiction landed Laura at Mission Creek. “My drug problem led me to be homeless, led me to be jobless,” she says. “And with an addiction, being jobless and homeless, I resorted to the life of crime.” She’s a year into a five-year sentence, of which she anticipates she’ll end up serving three years and 10 months. “It wasn’t for very long, my addiction,” she says, “but it was long enough to put me in prison. And ...” she exhales. “I’m missing — you know, time is one thing you can never get back. So,” she says, and stops. Her mom has passed away since she’s been incarcerated. She has kids.



Addiction and the attendant “bad choices” are how most of the women here today ended up imprisoned. More than one has relied on a food bank herself in the past. None of them have any previous gardening experience. Every single one uses the word “amazing” to describe the GRACE Garden Project.

“It’s a privilege, for sure,” Laura says. “We’re doing something to help, to give back.” All of the women echo that working hard here is an honor; Mission Creek inmates must demonstrate consistent good behavior to become part of the program. (The crew today has also been handpicked by facility officials who’ve screened out those with restraining orders preventing them from appearing in media, generally to avoid retraumatizing victims of violence. First names only are used at the facility’s request.)

“They don’t just throw you right out here,” another gardener, Konstance, notes. “Oh no, it doesn’t work that way. You have to prove to the facility that you’re trustworthy.” Another

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recurring theme: pride in doing a job from start to finish, “to watch what you plant grow and see what you’ve done,” Konstance says. “It’s amazing.” She shows a project she’s carried out solo: clearing a small greenhouse of 3-foot-high grass in order to plant peppers — bell, jalapeño, Hungarian hot banana. They’re flourishing. In her prior life, Konstance worked in cementing (“Totally opposite!” she says). She has two-and-a-half years of a seven-year sentence left, her story similar to others here. Standing by her peppers in the sun, she talks about struggling, losing everything. “And you really don’t know what you have until it’s gone,” she says. “You don’t know the people you hurt until you’re away from them ... You don’t know what kind of pain you’re causing. And I caused a lot.”

Konstance is availing herself of other opportunities at Mission Creek — there are courses for college credit, and she’s a graduate of a 12-week beekeeping certification program (which helped in clearing out the greenhouse, also full of bees — “I know which ones just want to be loved,” she says). Is she most proud of the peppers here? “You know I am. You know I am!” she says.

In a larger greenhouse, another member of today’s crew, Kandace, is bundling gorgeous, just-cut basil for delivery to the food bank. She loves the smell. She says she sings to the plants while she gardens, making up her own lyrics — “Everything’s gonna be all right, you’re gonna grow big and strong” — and setting them to her favorite Rolling Stones songs. Interspersed with joking, her words center on giving back to the community, on redemption, on hope. She’s been gardening here since the program started a year ago. “It’s great to be here this long — did I say that?” She laughs. “Yeah, I did. It’s great to be here this long and see what happens after we do all that work.” (The only bad thing: “The heat — when you’re sweating and carrying wheelbarrows of giant piles of manure,” she laughs.)

Kandace heaps praise on GRACE project coordinator Diane Fish, as all the women do. “Not only are we doing it, she’s telling us *what* we’re doing, what it’s going to do, what’s going to happen because we do it, and going through the whole process,” Kandace says, “so it’s something we can take with us.”

Fish is quick to turn the focus back to the inmates. “They make all of this happen — they do all the work,” she insists. And, she notes, that while the garden “has got all the feels associated with it,” the crews also work in the area planting trees, doing wetland restoration, at [the Belfair Salmon Center](#). “They’re totally saving the world,” Fish says, matter-of-fact, “one head of lettuce, one native plant at a time.” The women start out guarded, she says, then they begin to open up, to talk about their lives.

Elsewhere in the garden today, there’s Buffy, an accountant who ended up embezzling money to support her addiction and got “a very large theft charge” because of it. She’d love to see more programs like this so more inmates can benefit; because of the experience, she wants to go into conservation or forestry. Nikkea never had a job before, and GRACE, she says, has “given me a sense of pride in taking care of myself and just working. I’ve found that I love hard labor. I could never work behind a desk.” Johnna, too, says she’s “learned tremendous skills to take with me.” She’s also learned she does, in fact, like green onions.

LUNCH IS, EVERYONE agrees, the best part of the day, eaten beyond the garden under some apple trees, with birdsong and a breeze. The guard kindly declines the inmates’

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suggestion that she have a seat, too. Out here, the boxed lunches look like they're from a different planet: two sandwiches on white bread, one PB and J, one with a circle of lunch meat and a square of American cheese; a small bag of bite-sized Tostitos; a brownie. The facility's working toward better food, but meanwhile, overall assessments range from "great" to just "decent." Some inmates have prepackaged plastic pouches of pink salmon or mackerel, which they can order at Mission Creek if they or their families can pay for it; they do it, one says, "so we can eat healthy — so we can try."

The inmates get paid a dollar an hour to work at GRACE Garden Project — more than janitorial and some other jobs at the facility, which they say pay 42 cents an hour; less than cleaning along guardrails for the Department of Transportation, \$1.50. Opinions on whether \$1 an hour is enough vary: "It's yes and no," one woman says. The money's just a bonus, opines another — and while the whole crew comes cheaper than one minimum-wage worker, labor for a nonprofit means they're not taking paying jobs from, say, people raising families. No one on this GRACE crew is ready to join the current [nationwide prison strike](#) protesting, in part, the practice of low- or no-wage work.

They don't have jobs like sewing lingerie as on "Orange Is the New Black" (though corporations including Victoria's Secret and Starbucks have used prison labor), nor is minimum-security Mission Creek like the show otherwise, according to those who've seen it. They've got a gym, classes, four people to a room with a locked door — it's more like a campus, they say. Several of the women profess gratitude for a second chance at a time when they desperately needed it. They're all grateful for GRACE.

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Someone's purloined some basil and a purple pepper, and pieces get surreptitiously passed around — it tastes really, really good. One of the inmates' reps at Mission Creek is working toward getting them permission to eat the fruits of their labor on-site at GRACE. Meanwhile, they love it when some of the produce ends up back at the facility.

The conversation also includes the finer points of prison microwave cooking (Kandace has a great peanut-butter-cookie recipe) and how to keep socks with blown-out elastic up (Konstance rolls them). Nikkea's looking forward to wearing sundresses and cute hats on days like today when she gets out. Kandace says it'll be incredible to get to use real silverware.

They all definitely want to grow their own gardens.

Kitsap Conservation District's GRACE Garden Project is a restorative justice food-bank garden and conservation education project in Kitsap County, Washington. A limited number of its pumpkins will be sold as a fundraiser at the [Valley Vintage Market](#) in Poulsbo on October 19-20.

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