

Chain O'Lakes Department of Correction Landscape & Hort Classes- Noble County, Indiana

by Bruce Kennedy, Noble County, Indiana Purdue Master Gardener.

The Noble County Purdue Master Gardeners, under direction of and with an enormous amount of help from our Ag/Natural Resources Extension Educator Hanson Young, teamed up with Chain O'Lakes Correctional Facility Superintendent Michael Cunegin to offer the inmates an intensive training program in Horticulture and Landscape Design. The program was designed to educate the inmates to make them more employable upon release from prison and also to maybe give them a hobby to occupy their time instead of drugs and alcohol. We gave the guys a 80 hour course based on our own Master Gardener training program with an emphasis on landscape design and installation, greenhouse production, rain gardens, and other horticulture skills to help get them jobs when they got out.



The vegetable garden at the Chain O Lakes Correctional Center.

The guys asked us every night why we were there. Why would we take the time to come in there and teach “a bunch of criminals”. We told them “that’s what Master Gardeners do” but that wasn’t a good answer for them. It seems nobody had ever taken the time to do something for nothing for these guys. I finally told them the AA saying that if it weren’t for the grace of God that would be me in there and if it was I hoped that somebody would do the same for me. They understood that.

A ways into the classes a well-liked secretary at the facility was killed in a car wreck on the way to work one snowy morning. The guys asked us to design a memorial garden that they could plant for her. We told them they had the training now so they should do it themselves. They did and that spring we got them the plants and they planted it.

Master Gardeners teach inmates job training skills

So that gave us the idea to put out a vegetable garden to give the guys some hands on training. This minimum security prison is located in a State Park so it is surrounded by 3,000 acre of woods. Not the best place for a garden but there was a sod field behind the sewage ponds out back that got pretty good sun that Michael said we could use. Using only donated hand tools the guys turned over a 75’ X 75’ plot.

Michael took the guys to a nearby horse farm and they hauled in three eighteen foot trailer loads of composted horse manure. Hanson contacted a few seed companies and Sieger Seed Company donated us a large box full of all sorts of vegetable seeds. I started plants in my greenhouse for them and we were off to the races. Hanson and Liz Lightner made money donations and other Master Gardeners donated tools, plants, and books. We bought them 400' of garden hose and sprinklers so they could water. I let them use a spare electric fence charger and posts and wire to keep the onslaught of critters at bay. The guys landscaped around the buildings with donated plants to spruce the place up. They really took pride in these projects and in themselves. It was great to watch these guys grow as their plants grew. We used the guys to help us do the labor on other projects we had going on in the county. They planted two rain gardens we designed to control runoff into a river and into a lake chain.

1,100 pounds of produce donated to the needy

The produce from the garden was going to supplement the prisons institution diet. But one day they was up town helping us on a landscape project at the courthouse and it happened to be the day the local food pantry was open. The guys asked why were all those people standing in that line for. When they learned it was needy people waiting for free food, they were seriously moved. They went to Mr. Cunegin and told him they wanted to donate their produce to the food bank if that was possible. They ended up donating over 1100 pounds of fresh produce to the food bank that summer.

In their spare time the guys made us planters out of logs, wreaths out of grapevines, trellises out of tree branches, benches out of logs and grapevines, bird houses out of hollow logs, and other folk art for us to sell to use the money for our scholarship fund.

Experiencing "That Feel Good Thing"

I went out to the garden two or three times a week to check on things and one day I asked them, "Why are you guys doing this? You could be sitting under that shade tree and smoking cigarettes with them other guys, making fun of you sweating in the sun and working so hard.

They told me "it's weird and hard to explain, but it makes you feel good inside." It seems these guys had never experienced, or forgot about that "feel good" thing. So the best thing to come from this program has nothing to do with horticulture. Or helping the needy. It was to give these guys that feel good feeling. And now I know how to explain why I am a Master Gardener. It's that feel good thing.

Thank Yous and New Beginnings

Thank You for this award. It wouldn't have been possible without Michael Cunegin who was great to work with. He would also haul the guys to help out on other MG projects when they were short on guards. He also treated the inmates not only like human beings but as equals. In my book, this makes him a great man.

The same is true of Hanson Young, another truly great man. He taught a majority of the classes and donated money, time, and tools to the guys. The guys really respected Hanson and indeed, if he didn't show up at the garden at least once a week the guys wanted to know "Where's Hanson?"

Sara Weeks, Master Gardener and Extension secretary, also deserves much credit for her time and effort in this project that was way over and above what her job called for.

One other element, besides a great group of Master Gardeners, what made this project a overwhelming success and that is the guys who made up that first group that took the classes. They were very respectful, eager to learn, not afraid to ask questions, talented, and when we went out into the field a really hard working bunch of men. The folk art they made us was their idea to give back to us as we gave to them. Two of the guys had horticulture related jobs lined up when they got out as a direct result of their Master Gardener training. Another one is currently taking the Master Gardener classes thru a scholarship program we set up to help former inmates that took our classes.

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For more information on this project feel free to contact us at 260-636-2111 or bkenned@purdue.edu or sweeks@purdue.edu. PS: If anybody is interested in trading MG hats and/or shirts contact Bruce.

For more information about the Noble County Master Gardeners go to-
<http://www.ag.purdue.edu/counties/noble/Pages/NobleCountyMasterGardener.aspx>