

'IT'S A CHANCE TO DO SOMETHING CONSTRUCTIVE'

In community garden, inmates learn to make good choices

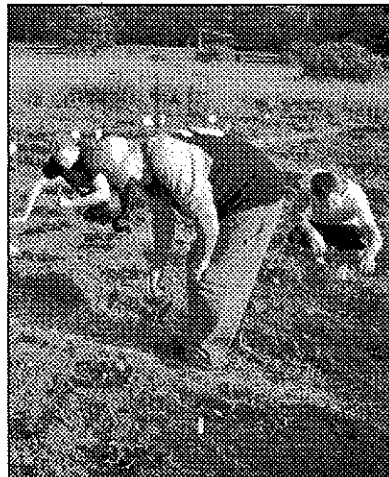
For inmates at the Waukesha County Huber Facility, spending time learning about gardening and nutrition from UW-Extension educators represents a step forward in their lives.

It's a "chance to do something constructive," Ray Cunneen, a corrections counselor at the work-release jail, says. "A lot of them take real ownership and pride as the garden grows and develops."

Waukesha County Extension's partnership with Huber started five years ago with a 20-foot by 20-foot plot in the Waukesha County Community Gardens, with 29 inmates harvesting 132 pounds of produce. Last year, almost 200 inmates grew more than 2,000 pounds of vegetables on a plot double the size of the first one. All produce goes to the Food Pantry of Waukesha County.

"In 2000, we had groups of six people meeting once a week," remembers Ann Wied, a Waukesha County UW-Extension horticulture educator.

"Now, due to overwhelming interest, we have groups of 15 participating twice a week."



Work-release inmates spend time weeding during UW-Extension's gardening and nutrition classes at Waukesha County Community Gardens.

'They're exposed to the whole concept of healthy eating'

From June through September, inmates walk to the garden from the nearby Huber Facility, a red brick structure on Northview Road, to spend an hour learning gardening and healthy eating.

Each session includes making a healthy snack from the garden such as zucchini salsa, spinach strawberry salad and watermelon punch. Since it's too early in the season for home-grown veggies, today's snack includes bananas and peanut butter.

After eating, Nutrition Educator Paula Cartwright, using charts and illustrations, tells the three women and 11 men about an "obesity epidemic" in America and the resulting risk of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and stroke. She introduces USDA's new "MyPyramid" and explains how eating lots of fruits and vegetables and getting half an hour a day of exercise can reduce health risks.

(more on back)

Inmates, who listen and ask questions during Cartwright's presentation, say they enjoy the fresh air as well as the learning and service aspects of the five-year-old program.

"I used to go to the food pantry when I was broke for food," says a participant named Chris, "so this is my way of giving back."

In just one session at the garden, Heather, another participant, says she learned about transplanting seedlings, to give gardeners a head start, and tomato ladders. "I want to do my own garden," she says.

In addition to tomatoes, the 30-foot by 70-foot plot includes purple beans, yellow wax beans, peppers, eggplants, cucumbers, carrots and a splash of color – pansies and petunias.

Corrections Counselor Ray Cunneen emphasizes the value to inmates of Extension's horticulture and nutrition curriculum.

"It's not so much the physical aspect, but the educational component," he says. "They're exposed to the whole concept of healthy eating and the appreciation of actually putting an effort into growing food."

The hope is that the healthy lifestyle concepts presented during UW-Extension classes will carry over into participants' lives once they're released from prison and that individuals will make informed choices.

'Opportunities for learning every time you turn around'

Like Heather, many participants say they plan to have their own gardens and adopt healthier diets when released from jail. After today's nutrition lesson, Chris says he'll cut down on fast food and soda.

It's results like these that make Huber classes extremely rewarding, says Waukesha County UW-Extension Nutrition Educator Paula Cartwright.

"I really like it," she says of the classes. "There's opportunities for learning every time you turn around."

What do inmates learn?

Evaluations show that as a result of taking part in Waukesha County UW-Extension's Huber gardening and nutrition program:

- 82 percent of participants say they have the knowledge to plant their own garden.
- 95 percent say they'll eat more fruits and vegetables.
- 89 percent say they will try to eat more than one kind of vegetable every day.

To learn more, visit waukesha.uwex.edu or contact Waukesha County UW-Extension Horticulture Educator Ann Wied at 262/548-7788. UW-Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and ADA.