

Behind the garden wall Not only plants grow in this garden Some San Quentin inmates are digging their way out of prison

Noelle Robbins, Special to The Chronicle
Saturday, January 14, 2006



It is hard not to notice the gray. Pale gray buildings surround an expanse of asphalt. Men in blue move in a somber fashion through a landscape of windswept concrete. For a first-time visitor to San Quentin State Prison, there can be a sense of foreboding and, frankly, fear.

But then a splash of vivid color bursts forth -- tucked into a small area bordered by steel-gray fencing and shadowed by a looming charcoal-gray tower. A garden, stitched into the corner like a bright calico patch lovingly tacked onto the frayed edge of a dull gray flannel blanket, glows in the late-afternoon sun.

Vibrant shades of reedy green, deep lake blue, rich garnet and burnished yellow-gold shimmer and undulate in the breezes buffeting the plot -- an image that is inviting and peaceful in a location that dictates against such a mood. And, although this garden lies on some of the most desirable real estate in the Bay Area, it is a rare law-abiding citizen who will have the pleasure of sharing it with the men who created it and nurture its growth.

The conceptual seeds of the garden were planted several years ago by Jacques Verduin, executive director of the Insight Prison Project, which sponsors 16 classes for San Quentin inmates that help them through incarceration and parole to become happier, more productive citizens. The classes include violence prevention, positive parenting, victim-offender dialogues, substance abuse, pre-parole preparation and meditation. Verduin, who believes that when "you grow plants, you grow people," had the backing of former San Quentin Warden Jeannie Woodford, a determined advocate of prisoner rehabilitation.

The project germinated under the guidance of Beth Waitkus, the volunteer director of the Insight Garden Program. For more than three years, she navigated the layers of institutional bureaucracy, fostering collaborative decision making between prison leadership, staff, inmates and volunteers.

The garden was finally born on the Winter Solstice two years ago, the shortest, darkest day of the year. In four short days, inmates, with support from volunteer experts, transformed a mound of mud into a 1,200-square-foot organic flower garden, and in the process sowed the promise of a tranquil haven in the bleak prison yard.

Since then, more than 250 inmates have participated in the garden program, gaining much more than just an education in gardening. They have learned that working in the garden means working on themselves, that the effort of digging, planting and nurturing applies as much to their hearts and minds as it does to the soil.

Now Fridays are regularly scheduled garden days combining classroom instruction and discussion with garden work. Volunteers share their expertise with the men. The inmates have become well-versed in the fundamentals of growing an organic flower garden in the Bay Area's Mediterranean climate. They have also explored how feelings of abundance or scarcity can impact the successful propagation of a garden, or a life.

Inmates enthusiastically share their views on how these concepts affect them and their experience in the garden: Michael feels that an abundance of garden knowledge, experience and observation -- for example, using compatible plantings to assure good light and root growth for all plants -- allows the gardeners to "plan for success." Travis reveals how a childhood spent "watching my mother grow 400 rose bushes" provided him with an abundant appreciation of "textures and colors" in the garden.

Troy believes that "plants respond to emotional attitude." When questioned whether bringing a positive emotional attitude to the garden includes singing to the plants, the men chuckle at the image of a musical gardening group, "The Boys in Blue."

For Ronnell, a scarcity mind-set can lead to destruction of natural surroundings. On the other hand, "Gardening and landscaping can bring abundance into my life. I can give back to the Earth, instead of killing the Earth."

Troy echoes this sentiment and is grateful to have "knowledge to take home." And the men are eager to return home, hopeful they can find employment on the outside using their gardening skills.

In fact, volunteer Kevin Sadlier, owner of Green Jeans Garden Supply in Mill Valley, often hears, "I can hardly wait to garden when I get out of here." Sadlier donates time and plenty of bat guano to feed the hungry organic garden. One key lesson he has

imparted is, "despite the risk of looking hodgepodge," diversity of plants -- and even weeds -- assures the health of the garden.

This lesson has shaped the entire gardening effort and its significance is not lost on this community of gardeners. While inmates usually cluster in ethnically exclusive groups in the prison yard, men of different races work in harmony and cooperation in the garden.

The garden also provides a sensual and experiential connection to the world. The inmates may not know every name of the geraniums, lavender, heliotrope and wild grasses that fill its borders, but they quickly lead visitors to plants sheltering a praying mantis, or sweetly scenting the air with soft powdery fragrance. The garden attracts a copious array of insect and bird life -- butterflies, lizards, worms, gulls and geese -- that bring movement, color, pest control and natural fertilizer to the plants.

Although there are some logical restrictions -- tools are securely locked and food production is not an option as it would be impossible to provide for the entire prison population -- the garden does offer a thriving, lively oasis for any inmate who chooses to wander its paths in a quiet moment.

And while there is debate about whether people who do bad things deserve good opportunities, Verduin sees the garden as "serving public safety." As inmates learn to patiently cultivate the garden, they learn, too, how to cultivate constructive responses to situations. This can mean the difference between committing another crime or not after they are paroled.

And that, according to Waitkus, is the whole point. "Inmates learn to nurture themselves and their community through gardening. We aim to encourage personal responsibility as well as teamwork through the practice of mindful gardening."

She has no doubt that the Insight Garden Program at San Quentin has done just that, providing "a place where men can smell, touch and enjoy flowers, plants and birds and take part in creating an environment that grows them as much as they grow it."

How to help

The San Quentin Prison Insight Garden Program relies on donations of services, supplies, and funds for its operation. Contact: Beth Waitkus, program director, at (415) 730-6301 or send tax-deductible contributions to: The Agape Foundation, 1095 Market St., Suite 304, San Francisco, CA 94103 noting "Insight Garden Program."

*This article appeared on page **F - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle*
