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Life

Garden provides tools to succeed, alternative to jail time

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The potatoes, squash, brussel sprouts and cabbages packed in the holiday baskets of the Oakland County Food Bank may have come from the Oakland County Community Corrections community garden.

The gardeners at the Weekend Weekday Alternative Misdemeanants Garden harvested more than 12,600 pounds of vegetables at the north Oakland County site on the grounds of Springfield Oaks Park.

"The garden is an alternative to incarceration and used when sentencing individuals who have been cited for such non-violent crimes as disorderly conduct, driving while license suspended, minors in possession of alcohol and driving under the influence of alcohol," said Judge Kelly Kostin of the 52-2 District Court in Clarkston.

"The court-ordered community service (working in the garden) provides an appropriate sanction when taking away a person's liberty, providing a way to give back to society and rehabilitation. The program provides a benefit to the community and frees up space for violent offenders that need to be behind bars."

Kostin credited retired Judge Michael Batchik and former Judge Dana Fortinberry as bringing the Alternative Misdemeanant garden to 52-2 District court.

Batchik said he and George Miller began a community garden in Novi in 1994.

"We had a great deal of success," Batchik said. "In 2002, when I transferred to Clarkston, I told Judge Fortinberry, 'let's start a garden.'"

Batchik agreed that nonviolent offenders who had committed offenses such as shop lifting or drunken driving could be used as laborers in the garden.

"This is a way for them to pay back society," Batchik said. "Locking them in jail for 10 days would cost the taxpayers \$800. This saves the taxpayers thousands of dollars and the recipients are charities such as Gleaners and the Oakland County Food Bank."

Batchik said when he was on the bench back in the 1980s, he was all for building a new jail.

"It only took a couple of years, and the jail was overcrowded and needed more bed space," he said.

The misdemeanants, or those convicted of committing a misdemeanor offense, pay for the costs of supervision with

the program.

"The program provides great satisfaction for many of the misdemeanants," Batchik said. "They return to see the harvest and the thousand of pounds of food produced, it's a win-win situation."

Fifty to 60 misdemeanor gardeners work on weekends and weekdays in the garden. In the colder months, gardeners work in a greenhouse provided by Bordines Nursery in Clarkston.

This year, the garden will grow 4,000 starts of vegetables, said Linda Muter Carmean, a Master Gardener and Community Corrections Specialist with the WAMM program.

Butternut, spaghetti and winter squash, cabbage, korabi, pumpkins, onion, potatoes, brussel sprouts, cauliflower, beans, cucumbers and broccoli are grown on the Springfield Oaks site.

"Basil, lavender and dill are also planted on the site. Garlic is replanted annually," said Carmean. "During the non-growing season, misdemeanants work to amend the soil and get the greenhouse operational."

The garden site is a cooperative effort of South Oakland County Recycling Authority and Oakland County Parks and Recreation Department who provide top soil, compost and woodchips to amend the soil at the garden.

Bordine's Nursery has provided perennials to the garden, which have been grown and then placed within the Oakland County Park system or at the county complex.

"Water is an issue for the garden, which has no well," Carmean said. "We have manpower, so we carry water."

Pat Hopkinson, owner of A Garden Space and a part-time Oakland County Parks employee, said that the misdemeanants are learning job skills.

"If you know about flowers and can weed, you're employable," Hopkinson said.

The misdemeanants tell Carmean they like this kind of work and helping people who need help. Many of the male misdemeanants normally work in outside occupations such as construction and enjoy working in the garden, Carmean said.

"Most of the misdemeanants are great people," she said. "They are young and have lots to learn. Many of the individuals over 30 years of age are pretty ashamed and remorseful about what they did."

The misdemeanants tell Carmean it feels good to work. Carmean receives comments such as "giving back to the community is pretty rewarding" and "my grandparents jarred everything, I saw them doing it and this takes me back."

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