

Waterford garden tended as court-ordered service

9/22/2008, 1:12 p.m. ET

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The Associated Press

WATERFORD, Mich. (AP) — Take one Waterford area garden, add days of ample sun and rain, and the end result has been a boon to the area's less fortunate.

"We have a bumper crop this year," said Judge Phyllis McMillen, referring to the vegetables coming out of the 51st District Court's Community Service garden at Waterford's Hess Hathaway Farm.

More than three tons of vegetables have been donated this harvest season to Grace Centers of Hope, Baldwin Center and Waterford's Meals on Wheels program, said Linda Hardacre, the court's chief probation officer.

Crops include three types of squash, green beans, red and green cabbage, tomatoes, corn, green and yellow peppers, eggplant, broccoli and cucumbers.

The garden, which began in 1996, is cultivated by people who are sentenced to community service.

In the mid-1990s, the court held a focus group with people who had been through the judicial system to find out what worked and what didn't, McMillen said.

"It was interesting they said jail time had minimal effect on them," she said.

"But what they didn't like was community service. In effect, it was more punitive."

Since providing the gardening as a place for community service, things have changed.

"We have learned since that it is incredibly therapeutic. They do that and give back to the community," McMillen said.

McMillen, with probation officers Shelly Booth and Hardacre, borrowed the garden idea from Novi's court system.

"They get a great sense of pride helping the community," Hardacre said.

"They also get to take a small amount of produce home to their families. They're grateful and happy to help."

The probationers also establish an "amazing relationship" with the probation officers who are also at the garden.

"We do tons of work for the township at the farm," Hardacre said.

The crew will get the farm ready for fall. In winter months, probationers shovel ice from the township pond and pick up trash. Come spring, the half-acre garden will be tilled again. Hardacre did put some nitrogen in the soil this year, she said, which may have helped. "It's been phenomenal and the garden is still producing," she said.

The crops have flourished when the need is so great, she said.

"The organizations we help so badly want the food," Hardacre said.

Information from: The Oakland Press, <http://www.theoaklandpress.com>

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