

Garden 4 Good



Garden 4 Good was started in 2011 at Hutchinson Correctional Facility-East Unit (HCF). A group of inmates had the idea to start a garden so the men had fresh fruits and vegetables to supplement the processed meals from the cafeteria. When the deputy warden gave her approval of a garden onsite, the future gardeners confessed, they knew nothing about gardening! The warden's husband was a Reno County Extension Master Gardener (EMG) and knew just the group of volunteers who could help get this project in the ground.

HCF is the second largest facility for residential adult men in Kansas. This medium-security prison is focused on helping the residents improve their well-being to ensure a successful reentry into the community. They offer a variety of educational opportunities teaching skills for later employment in addition to the general coping skills for life.

One of the opportunities available is Garden 4 Good. Inmates can apply to join this program and help maintain the almost 2-acre garden. Each week four EMGs and one Extension horticulture agent volunteer at the facility providing educational support for the gardeners. Initially the classes were focused on growing vegetables. As interest in the program grew so did the content. Currently, 20 different horticulture subjects are taught including landscape design, tree identification, bee keeping and agribusiness.



Thirty-five residents are trained as Master Gardeners and actively maintain the onsite garden each year. Garden 4 Good has become so popular there is a waitlist for new members. Over the years, 125 inmates have gone through the program. The members are able to pursue their interests in the garden. One gardener has taken on the role of managing the compost bins and experiments making compost tea.

The men have taken ownership of this program and started a board of directors. The board manages the other gardeners making sure they are properly trained and that everyone is doing their part. The garden is mostly set up into rows of fruit/vegetables grown for the community, but there is a section divided into four-foot by four-foot plots called the square-foot garden. In this area, each gardener is given their



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own plot to choose what they grow and the resulting produce is theirs. Many gardeners are eager to share this produce with their family during visits.

So much produce is harvested at Garden 4 Good the growers can't consume it all. They have identified local non-profits that provide resources for those in need. The gardeners have made it a goal each year to grow as much produce as possible for these



organizations. This year their goal is to grow 40,000 pounds of produce and donate 30,000 of that to the community. The board decides what produce is grown to support the needs of the community. The gardeners also sell produce to other inmates. Some of the money from these sales is used to purchase seeds and equipment for the garden, but most of it is donated to the community.

Establishing a program such as Garden 4 Good requires a close relationship with staff at the facility. Regular communication and staff support is essential. Every program will be different based on the relationships between volunteers and site staff as well as the available resources.

The rewards of Garden 4 Good are abundant. The gardeners have learned how to be patient, continuing to work hard even when the plants don't cooperate. The various backgrounds of the inmates present learning opportunities as they work together and find each other's strengths. The garden has enabled members to grow individually and collectively. Some members knew nothing about growing veggies when they began and have evolved into leaders. Many have shared how their participation in Garden 4 Good has kept them from getting involved in drama that happens in a correctional facility. Gardening during this challenging time in their lives has been beneficial for their mental health. It has given them something to do that is productive and minimized idle time. Garden 4 Good members acknowledge it is a privilege to be a gardener at HCF and work hard not to lose the opportunity.



Thank you to Pamela Paulsen, Reno County Horticulture Extension Agent, for sharing about Garden 4 Good and your work towards its success. This program provides a new perspective on the privilege of gardening and how we can all garden with a purpose.

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