GROWING NEW LIVES

A gardening program on the largest penal colony in the world.

BY CARRINGTON MORRIS / PHOTOGRAPHS BY LINDSAY MORRIS

On an island in the East River not far from LaGuardia, down a dirt trail leading to a shed, past a table strewn with plant cuttings, a doorway opens out onto a glass greenhouse. In the gentle humidity of teeming plant life, long tables are topped with tray after black-plastic tray of thriving seedlings—tomatoes, peppers, cauliflower, string beans, thyme, basil, rosemary—and their self-declared caregiver, Wayne.

"I try not to let anybody touch these till just the right moment," says Wayne. Dressed in a broadly striped orange and white jumpsuit, he is tall, lean and very protective of seedlings, some of which have just completed their time in the greenhouse and are ready to be transplanted under the open sky in the garden outside.

"If you were here, like, 15 minutes before, when they took all my babies out, you'd have seen how protective I was," he says mock-tough-guy, eyes twinkling.

"You can get attached to them. It's like your kids. I mean...I knew it was coming, you know what I mean?"

Welcome to GreenHouse, a gardening program of the largest penal colony in the world.

Better known as Rikers, the island jail complex currently serves as home and waiting station to approximately 11,000 inmates—men, women and adolescents who are sent here to serve short sentences or wait out detentions until their verdict or sentence is determined at trial.

It is also home to a little-known garden, an oasis of calm and beauty in the unlikeliest of landscapes.

Run by the Horticultural Society of New York ("the Hort") in conjunction with the NYC Department of Correction (DOC) since 1996, the GreenHouse program is part of the Hort's broad mission to "sustain the vital connection between people and plants." The 111-year-old society has evolved over the years from an old-school institution celebrating nature's majesty as expressed in ornamental gardens to a proactive tour de force: working across the social spectrum in urban farms, edible schoolyards and rooftop gardens, promoting eco-friendly techniques such as bioremediation and rainwater harvesting, as well as environmental literacy and social services.

The trailblazing GreenHouse program combines year-round vocational training, education and horticultural therapy for inmates serving short sentences for low-level, nonviolent crimes such as drug possession, petty theft, prostitution, violating probation and disorderly conduct. Another branch of GreenHouse works with male detainees age 19 to 21 who attend East River Academy, an alternative high school on Rikers.

Both programs aim to provide job skills, life skills and rehabilitation to facilitate reentry into society and to diminish the likelihood of reoffense.

Nurture with nature. Hilda Krus, director of Rikers' GreenHouse program, says the curriculum combines hands-on vocational training, indoor and outdoor classroom education and horticultural therapy.
Run by the Horticultural Society of New York and the NYC Department of Correction, Rikers’ trailblazing program provides job and life skills, facilitates reentry into society and diminishes the likelihood of re-offense.

Wayne is one of the 230 inmates to participate in GreenHouse this year. He has 13 days left of a three-month sentence and is hoping to get his “second-chance tomatoes” strong enough to carry on without him when he leaves.

“I can’t tell you why but the first ones didn’t take, so we tried to replant. I’ve been protecting these,” he says earnestly.

Horticultural therapy uses gardening and accompanying sensory and mental stimulation, under the guidance of trained professionals and catering to individual needs, to bring beneficial outcomes to a broad range of populations and conditions. Practiced in hospitals and senior homes, it has shown favorable results in the treatment of autism, substance abuse, behavioral problems, developmental disabilities, mental illness and physical and emotional trauma.

“A lot of the state facilities have horticulture, but it’s not necessarily therapeutic,” says Hort therapist Hilda Kris in reference to other correctional institutions nationwide. “It might be a vocational program, or it might be ground maintenance.” She’s been director of the GreenHouse program since 2008 and speaks with an exceptional combination of gentleness and strength in her German-accented intonations. “Those three elements our curriculum has—hands-on vocational training, indoor and outdoor classroom education and horticultural therapy—that combination is relatively rare.”

Robert has been here a month and he’s working on one of the 62 raised beds proudly built by GreenHouse participants prior to his arrival. (When you can’t plant things, build things! In the off-season, GreenHouse participants have spent much of their hands-on time constructing—birdhouses, bat houses, bird feeders, planters, post-and-rail fences, a gazebo with a waterfall.)

Robert had no gardening experience a month ago. “I didn’t think I would like it,” he says. “To be honest with you, man, I was like, ‘Aw, I ain’t with the gardening thing, you know? But it was, like, ‘Wow,’ when I did get into it, what I got was this program helps you get back to society. There’s a meaning to this. It’s not like you leave here and go have a meaning. You have something to keep you out of trouble and keep you focused,” he says, thoughtfully petting the soil around one of “Wayne’s” tomato seedlings.

Once imprisoned, there’s a 67 percent chance that a released offender will be re-arrested within three years. It’s in this context that alternative programs such as GreenHouse are gaining recognition as a means to slow the crime-and-punishment revolving door.

Introduction to Corrections—the 600-page 2012 primer for criminal justice studies that covers everything from correctional law to solitary confinement and the death penalty—notes the success of the Garden Project, a kindred post-release program founded in 1992 at the San Francisco County Jail. The Corrections book hails the one-acre vegetable garden, citing:

“reduction in illegal activities, fewer friendships with criminal associates, limited reliance on damaging familial relationships, less drug use, and an increased desire for help. Psychological benefits included higher self-esteem and reduced anxiety, depression and risk-taking behavior.”

The authors conclude that garden programs “offer huge incentives” and “improve the prognoses of inmates who also receive mental health services.”

NYC Department of Correction Commissioner Dora Schriro is an avid gardener and a big proponent of the program. It’s her second time with the NYC DOC, the first as assistant commissioner in the early ’80s, when GreenHouse was just taking root. After stints as commissioner in Arizona and Missouri as well as serving as deputy to Homeland Security secretary Janet Napolitano, Schriro returned as commissioner and hoped she would have this garden to look forward to.

“I wasn’t sure what had happened in between,” she says.

That “in between” time was when Schriro discovered her own love of horticulture. “I went out in my yard on a really bad day,” she explains, “and I started to dig in the dirt, and it felt so good, I just never stopped.” She sees gardening as a “great way to express your-
Cultivation. Correction Commissioner Dora Schriro says gardening builds judgment, impulse control, problem solving and decision making—all essential for rehabilitation.
**Introduction to Corrections**—the 600-page criminal justice primer that covers everything from solitary confinement to the death penalty—hails prison gardens,citing reduced drug use and other illegal activities and higher self-esteem.

self on good days” and a “really positive way to fix yourself when the days are not so good.”

Far more important than crops, Schiro says gardening yields something she characterizes as “soft skills.” “The hard skills are the literacy, employability and sobriety,” she explains. Soft skills have more to do with judgment: impulse control, problem solving, decision making—just as essential for rehabilitation. “The garden is a place where you need to be gentle,” she says.

GreenHouse director Kris points out that in the environment many inmates come from, being gentle can be an invitation to be taken advantage of. “Some people have to keep their guard up at all times,” she says. But “a plant is not a threatening thing. It’s not going to talk back. It’s not going to screw you over. So they can bond with something that is not threatening. That is a very healthy aspect of being gentle, opening the heart for something without having to pay for it.”

In the spirit of what’s called “restorative justice,” GreenHouse has provided vegetables to City Harvest and seedlings to shelters and other community organizations. They make value-added products, such as a soothing herbal balm, seed packages and lavender sachets, which they offer to victims’ shelters along with pumpkins in the fall. It’s a small gesture, but it reinforces an awareness for inmates that committing a crime is not just breaking a law; there are human victims. In her capacity as commissioner in Missouri, Schiro oversaw a gardening program based on restorative justice that provided in one year 21,000 pounds of produce for the state food bank. A larger gesture but with the same sentiment at heart.

Back in the garden, Charles, Edward and D’wan are at adjacent beds planting Cherokee tomatoes. Charles has been with GreenHouse for a month.

“I have learned more than I ever knew all of my life, really, as far as gardening,” he says. “I know there’s a lot to be learned here, and I just have an open ear. I love it.” GreenHouse’s curriculum includes non-chemical pest control, soil science, plant propagation, green roofs and rainwater collection. Classes are taught in small segments to accommodate regularly incoming and outgoing students.

Now in his 60s, Charles says the last time he gardened was as a boy in Mississippi, helping his grandfather raise tomatoes, beans, corn and watermelon for the family. His GreenHouse experience has given him ideas for his own family yard when he gets out in 30 days, where he says he might plant tomatoes, peppers and cauliflower.

As a woman named Alicia digs her hands into the raised flowerbeds, one can better see images of three of her grown sons, each now dead, tattooed up her arm. She began at GreenHouse three months ago but it’s not her first gardening experience. Back in Coney Island, she says, she helped turn a vacant lot into a garden.

“I got the kids in the neighborhood and they would come over and clean the lots. And then we planted cucumbers and stuff.” She says after her release she hopes to find work at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. “I go all the time, because I like plants. It’s something to do to pass my time away. Better than not doing nothing, I’ll tell you the truth. Plus,” she jokes, “it’ll keep me out of jail, too.”

To that end, GreenHouse participants receive horticulture certification based on hours spent studying and gardening. For some like Alicia, the two- to eight-month training ignites an interest they wish to pursue professionally.

Crucially, the training doesn’t have to end when inmates leave the island. The Hort’s aftercare program, GreenTeam, offers post-release paid internships and continued horticulture training. Moreover, aftercare provides newly released inmates with essential bridging services that can help address varying combinations of housing, financial, legal, job preparation, recovery, health and mental health needs. These services are vital at this time when individuals reentering society are most vulnerable, most at risk of relapse if they have substance abuse problems, most prone to reverting to destructive behavior patterns. But also, if they can secure a little footing and momentum, a time when they have the best chance to reset the trajectory of their life’s course.

“That, I think, is unusual,” says Kris of the post-release aftercare component. “That’s a rare possibility.”

The DOC supplies the officers, the land, the facilities, tools and maintenance, but the Hort’s consistent funding “has spared the program from the vicissitudes of city funding, shifting administrations and shifting priorities,” says the Hort’s executive director, Sam Hobel, who also attributes the viability of the jobs program to the burgeoning food movement. Kris agrees, citing “the realization that there are jobs in the green industry. These skills are becoming more valuable.”

To date, GreenHouse and GreenTeam have been responsible for the greening and garden maintenance of 20 inner-city libraries and eight schoolyards, in addition to numerous city and nonprofit shelters, public housing projects, city parks, and community and private gardens—with GreenHouse providing the seedlings and
GreenTeam providing the on-location work. The Hort has big dreams for the future of both, but much comes down to funding. To date, the joint programs exist thanks to generous grants (W. Atlee Burpee Foundation and van Ameringen Foundation, among others), fund-raisers (the annual New York Flower Show Dinner Dance, the Hort’s fall luncheon) and big-hearted board members.

The post-release GreenTeam program would love to secure its own plot, a fixed location to grow food off-island, continue horticulture training and possibly expand production to provide more outlets with their produce.

But for now they will keep forging ahead. As Commissioner Schriro says, “This is a really important partnership, not just between the department and the Hort but between all of us and the population. It’s through them that we keep the community safe. As they get better, we all get safer.”

At the other end of the Rikers greenhouse, a door leads out onto a patio where a man named Quentin stands on a chair, arms uplifted as he weaves branches that form a curved arch to a pergola of his own design.

He assesses his adjustments to the curly willow cuttings while detailing his creative process. “We had a scrap pile just before yesterday,” he says, his voice scratchy and charming. From these scraps Quentin creates a fairytale entrance to a path that leads to a rock garden. “I did the walk, I did the arbor,” he tells us, beaming. He’s leaving Rikers tomorrow after seven months and is just putting on the finishing touches. “I’ve left my mark,” he declares, “and I will be coming back as a volunteer.”

The day after his release, Quentin calls the Hort, ready to join GreenTeam. ☮

Carrington Morris is copy editor for Edible Manhattan and hails from Detroit, a food desert with an abundance of unused land and a towering incarceration rate, which circuitously led to this story.