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## Gardening on Rikers

Ralph Gardner Jr. on One of the Island's Few Bright Spots

URBAN GARDNER A18

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## One Bright Side of Rikers Island

By Ralph Gardner Jr.

I wouldn't say it was good to be back on Rikers Island; I don't think it's ever good to be on Rikers Island—whether prisoner or staff. It was never the most attractive place, the demands of prison architecture dissuading the sort of flights of fancy Frank Gehry indulged at Bilbao or Santiago Calatrava plans for his gull-winged World Trade Center area transportation hub.

And it's even less inviting than when I worked there in the late '70s. Actually I worked in the New York City Department of Correction's equally brutalist headquarters, then at 100 Centre St., but as a public-affairs officer made frequent trips to the island to escort dignitaries, or to oversee the publication of the department's monthly newspaper, the *Pen*, printed on ancient letterpress machines in a low-slung building behind the jails.



Nonetheless, virtually every facility had an expansive front lawn. It wasn't impossible to spy the occasional pheasant—yes, pheasant—scampering across. And there was certainly enough open space that for those of us lucky enough to enjoy freedom of movement (even though you couldn't then and can't now walk from point A to point B; pedestrians would obviously complicate the task of keeping track of prisoners) the experience was one of nature, and even wilds, certainly more so than in the canyons of Manhattan.

But with the prison population boom of the '80s and '90s, seemingly every available space was filled with jails and trailers, all festooned with high fences topped with spools of razor ribbon. Whatever little charm the island once had is long gone, along with the pheasants.

There is one notable exception, however, even if I didn't visit on the most hospitable day—GreenHouse, a program run by the Horticultural Society of New York for sentenced prisoners on a two-and-a-half-acre plot of land that boasts a water feature, a gazebo (it's called the Peace Pagoda) and parading guinea fowl. Indeed, most of the color that morning was provided by the prisoners enrolled in the program. They wear eye-popping orange windbreakers and orange-and-white-striped uniforms, better to locate them should they get lost on the way back to their housing units.

But the risk of escape would seem rather low: They're short-term inmates, sentenced to a year or less (longer than that and they're sent to facilities upstate). And assignment to the GreenHouse program—where they grow plants from seed in its greenhouse and tend its butterfly and bird garden, its medieval-style herb garden and its vegetable patch, and take classroom instruction in horticulture—is considered something of a plum assignment.

“There’s a waiting list for this job,” explained Wayne Sisman, a 35-year-old former salesman incarcerated for being part of a mortgage-fraud scheme. Mr. Sisman’s daily routine—males report to the garden five days a week first thing in the morning, sentenced females arriving soon after they depart—includes feeding ants to the venus flytrap (“We’re going to get it to flower before I leave,” the inmate vowed, “they’ve never had it flower.”) and doling out bread to the guinea hens.

“It gives you a break from the monotony,” Mr. Sisman said. “It’s a glimmer of color in the drab world of being in the prison. I enjoy responsibility. Coming here gives me something to be responsible for.”

Upon release, inmates can join the GreenTeam, a horticultural society paid-internship program that provides training and job-readiness skills. The society also runs horticultural vocational-training programs in a couple of Rikers’s adult- and adolescent-detainee facilities. But the fact is that recidivism is high. Fifty to 60% of the population is back within a year, according to Stephen Morello, the department’s deputy commissioner for public information.

“The question we’re now asking when they’re here with us,” said Correction Commissioner Dora Schriro, who dropped by the program and is a gardener herself, “is how do we leverage that time, how do we make them more accountable for the choices they make and move them in a direction over time to make better and better decisions? Should they come back, we’re resolved to take up where we left off.”



Hilda Krus, who runs the program, is a horticultural therapist, the emphasis almost more on therapy than horticulture. “It’s really about cultivating people,” she said as several female prisoners, escorted by a female correction officer, arrived and got to work planting seeds and watering the plants in the greenhouse.

Apparently, one of the perks of the program is that, come summer, even though you’re not allowed to bring the garden’s bounty of lettuce, tomatoes, apricots, figs, etc., back to your cell or dormitory, you’re allowed to indulge on the job. The program’s pesto is supposedly excellent, as is the mozzarella and tomato salad (the mozzarella imported from the outside, of course). And the GreenHouse also makes an aromatic chest rub whose ingredients include olive oil, beeswax, lavender and thyme. With the proper marketing, the product could probably become something of a cash cow for the Horticultural Society.

However, Sara Hobel, the society’s executive director, acknowledged that its Rikers Island programs are intended less to mint the next Michael Pollan than to help redirect people’s lives. “The likelihood anybody is going to raise Angus beef is slim,” she said.

Ms. Krus observed that the act of gardening lends itself to contemplation and reflection, the lack of which may have contributed to the prisoners finding themselves in their current predicament. “Often when discharge is coming around, we see so many thoughts come up—worrying about how things will go,” the therapist said. “They use this garden for having a couple of minutes to themselves, or a conversation if it’s needed. Working in the soil together it just happens naturally that we talk and our students tell us things.”

Yolanda Hill, in on a DWI conviction, saw the program’s benefits in more focused and immediate terms. “I think this is the best job in the jails,” she proclaimed, comparing it to the prison tailor shop, where she worked previously and suffered from swelled feet. “You get to see more out here. I like the birds and stuff. You don’t have to wait to go to rec. You already have rec.”