

Tough love gardening

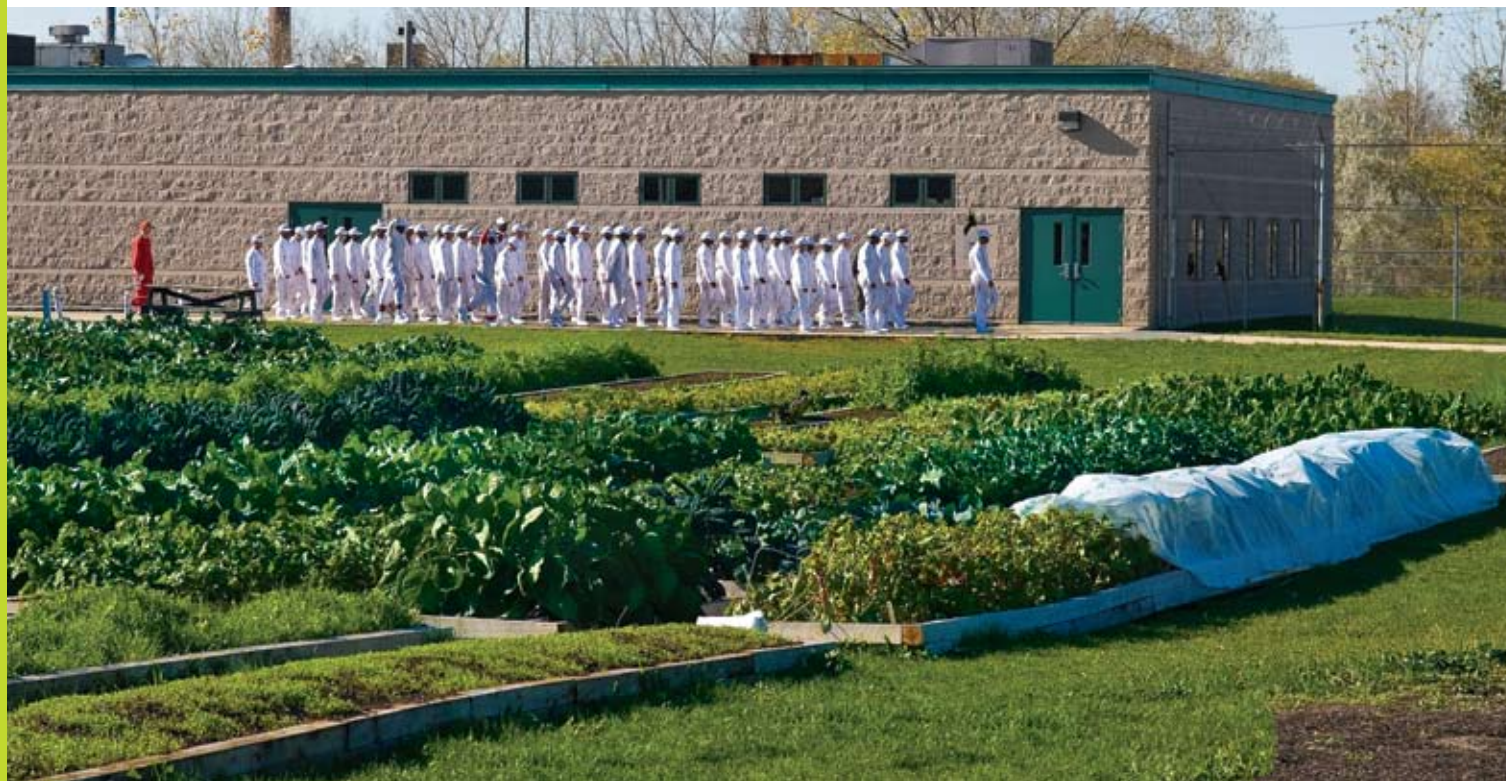
Growing vegetables from seeds does not provide instant gratification. It takes a season's worth of patience and daily commitment. There are mundane tasks to complete in extreme weather, and problems to solve. Sometimes crops falter or fail. But during the time between planting and harvest, Frank Johnson, director of programs for the Cook County Sheriff's Office, believes working in the Boot Camp garden can teach important life lessons to young men who desperately need them.

Johnson, a retired colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps, is responsible for training programs at Boot Camp, a program for men ages 17 to 35 who plead guilty in exchange for an alternative sentence. Instead of prison, inmates get a second

chance: four-months of military-style discipline and eight months of intensive parole. The program has an enviable success rate. Of the 75 percent who complete the one-year program, 90 percent remain out of jail five years later.

Adding gardening to the training programs is an idea Johnson and others in the Sheriff's Office cultivated for years. It blossomed into reality last summer when Angie Mason, the Garden's director of community gardening, agreed to manage the project. After securing funding from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, she supervised adult interns from Windy City Harvest, a skills-training program the Garden offers in partnership with City Colleges of Chicago. The interns

Below: Organic gardening is included in the training programs at the Cook County Sheriff's Office Boot Camp.



Above: Frank Johnson, director of programs for the Cook County Sheriff's Office, left, and Angie Mason, the Garden's director of community gardening.

worked side by side with inmates to build 30 raised beds, each 52 feet long, at the fenced facility on Chicago's west side. Inmates then learned how to grow organic produce, some ultimately served in the mess hall and some donated to neighborhood food banks.

Boot Camp staff enforce high standards in the garden. The men must show respect to Mason and her staff in the tough military style the staff not so quietly demand. They must also work independently and follow strict instructions. One reason the boot camp program succeeds, Johnson believes, is because it gives the men the structure and discipline they need to become mature adults able to survive in the world.

For the men who complete Boot Camp, getting their life on track also means finding a job. So far, the new program offers seeds of hope. Of the 28 men who worked in the Boot Camp garden in 2009, 11 have applied to Windy City Harvest, which would enable them to earn a Certificate of Sustainable Horticulture and Urban Agriculture. Time will tell if they succeed. But the desire to turn a second chance into an education with job training is a measure of success in any gardener's notebook.

Left: Boot Camp inmates helped build 30 raised beds at the fenced facility on Chicago's west side.