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Organic Gardening – A Beautiful Mess!

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L. Edward May

May 1, 2017

Filed under Uncaged

The heavily fortified, razor wired fence gate opened. Trucks had dumped loads of organic soil, lumber, and gardening tools onto the prison yard the day before. Now, twenty excited men, including myself, formed into work groups. We had all been looking forward to this day that seemed to take forever to arrive. The past nine months, we had been studying about permaculture (agricultural) systems. We learned that permaculture, like organic gardening, views plants as part of a whole system that requires planning, observation and vigilance.

I was one of the first men to sign up for the "Insight Gardening Program" offered at California State Prison – Los Angeles County. I had not grown any vegetables, herbs, or flowers since I had lived in a commune, back in the 1970's. My excitement was a nostalgic blend of anticipation.

The instructors, Dave and Armando, brought their experience planting in this desert atmosphere, at 2,710-foot elevation, while our weekly class contributed intense devotion and determination. Characteristics used in our past crimes were now used for the good of the environment. Our class divided into three groups: "the Ranchos," "Permaunit" and my group, "the Green Thumbs."

We shared ideas regarding the designing of a small, fifteen hundred square foot area. Some of us even with anti-social personalities managed to work well together. Early on, Dave and Armando brought in various flower and vegetable seed packets for us to see. Later, on another occasion, they surprised us with numerous different types of fresh flowers.

As we dissected the flowers, a friend of mine, Omar, got emotional and the room went silent. All eyes were on him as he began to speak softly and slowly. "I haven't touched a flower in twenty-nine years." The profundity of his comment was not lost on us, as most of us knew Omar had been on Death Row for seventeen of those years. Most of the men listening felt his heavy heart and tears clouded our sight. Other men then opened up and shared their experiences as we proceeded doing something most people around the globe take for granted. The touch and feel of the soft flower petals was quite a contrast to the concrete and steel of prison. I shook the pollen loose and found myself smiling. Colorful stems and petals decorated my desk as pollen stuck to my fingers. It was a beautiful mess. Our group grew closer and more trusting after the encounter.

All our in-class studies really help. I learn about the effects of Genetically Modified Organisms (G.M.O.'s) and what elements make for a healthy soil, such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. We also learned about different watering techniques, beneficial and harmful insects, types of organic fertilizers and were given examples of various soils: sand, clay, and loam (a loose mixture-combination).

Many of us had not performed physical labor or any type of intensive exercise in a while. We each chose our work assignments from a prepared list compiled by Dave. I picked digging trenches and once finished, I joined the wheelbarrow brigade. We mixed the existing heavy, dry, and sandy earth, with the fluffy, nutrient-filled soil brought in by the trucks. As the sun struggled to break through the clouds, we worked as a team. When one of us got tired, another man took over, no questions asked. We busted ass. There was not much talk as we worked. The time for talking was over.

Eventually, it was time to implement our design plans. A worldwide landscaping company that designs gardens

met with us on numerous occasions, volunteering their time and expertise. A few even showed up to work alongside us. During the initial discussion, most of the visitors were women who had never seen the inside of a prison. They were apprehensive, to say the least. All they knew about prison was what they had seen on television or read in the newspapers. Some were timid, understandably nervous, and uneasy as the meeting began. Eventually, they let their guard down and we all worked as one for the common goal.

Before the volunteers left, each made a brief statement. Most had expected an uncomfortable and hostile setting. By the end of the project, they said we had changed their perception of men in prison and described us as pleasant and warm. They thanked us before departing and I noticed it was an emotional farewell for us all.

As our project progressed, we agreed on a custom-designed, two-tiered, curved plot of land. The barren and bleak area transformed and came to life. As men walked the yard, they stopped to watch us. Maybe for them it was just prison—to us, it was to slice of heaven. We completed the project in a few days. Unfortunately, the herb and flowers waiting in small containers to be planted were eaten by a local family of hungry rabbits, right down to their roots! I am sure it was a treat for them and if they could speak, they would thank us!

I was not the only one whose body was sore afterwards, but the sweat and toil was well worth it. The planting of 80 ~~eight~~ or so tiny potted plants commenced a couple of days later. Each was marked with a plastic identifying stick that included rosemary, oregano, sage, coriander, marjoram, thyme, lavender, and other aromatic scents. The colorful poppies, columbine, snapdragons, alyssum, foxgloves, and other flowers would follow. Dave and Armando laid them on top of the fertile earth in the symmetrically planned locations. We dug the holes and carefully placed them in. What a pleasure it was to feel the stalks and leaves and to see the extensive root systems as we firmly patted the soil around them. Following the cherished moment, watering was next—not too much, just the right amount to get the ground damp.

Our allotted time was up; prison rules dictated the end. Part of the class was assigned to water the garden daily, due to the fact our class only met on Fridays. That evening I reflected on the proud work we had accomplished as a team. I walk past our garden every day, imagining how neglected the area used to look and how tranquil and beautiful it looks now.

Dave and Armando's time and effort made all this possible by successfully navigating through the prison bureaucracy and we are so grateful. Some staff members have also been supportive. Other California State Prisons have been creating gardens. A woman named Beth got the whole idea started. She flies in from time to time to check out our progress. I am sure she will be delighted by its design and beauty! Soon, we will add vegetables. The plan is to donate the anticipated bountiful harvest to the Lancaster Food Bank.

I pray our little piece of heaven on Earth will last for many years to come.