

# The New Garden Society

By Gael McCully, MCH

Everyone who works in the horticultural industry knows it demands knowledge, skill, hard work, and long hours, all of which are rewarding in themselves. Many of MNLA's members find additional rewards by sharing their expertise with others and giving back to their communities.

One such member is Renée Portanova. Renée is the lead horticulturalist at the Newton Cemetery and Arboretum. She also devotes many hours to leading The New Garden Society (TNGS), a non-profit organization she co-founded with Erika Rumbley in 2014. Erika is the director of horticulture at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. TNGS was inspired by James Jiler and his book, *Doing Time in the Garden*, which outlined his approach to creating a successful horticultural vocational training program within correctional facilities.

While Renée had no experience working with incarcerated people, she saw an opportunity to merge her interests in land restoration, the green economy, and adult education with the opportunity to improve the lives and opportunities of those in the correctional system. She approached the Massachusetts Department of Corrections (DoC), which expressed interest in the idea.

Working closely with the director of treatment, the program has trained over 500 incarcerated and detained students, ages 13-80, in the art and science of plants. Weekly classes teach the core concepts of horticulture, and students apply these concepts in prison gardens and greenhouses, where they find healing and an opportunity to build job skills. TNGS' prison-based trainings are taught by horticulturists, farmers, landscapers, and other green industry professionals who bring their diverse plant

expertise and land-care experiences to every classroom. Supplementary reading is provided to participants through an on-site horticulture library.

TNGS currently leads vocational training programs at two greater-Boston prisons: Old Colony Correctional Center and the Massachusetts Treatment Center. In 2015-2016, TNGS facilitated a pilot Summer Plant Lab to support high-school science learning at a Massachusetts Department of Youth Services facility in Boston. From

2013-2016, TNGS also ran the therapeutic horticulture program at the DoC's Bridgewater State Hospital prior to the facility's privatization. Eight additional Massachusetts correctional facilities have identified a need for horticulture programming.

The program operates in minimum- and medium-security facilities and has been popular with students since its inception. They have grown more than 3,000 pounds of food that supplements each facility's kitchen and provides hunger relief to local community organizations.

TNGS defines success in terms of giving people job skills and teaching what it means to be a team player, finish a task, be on time, etc. Students fill out a questionnaire identifying the kind of skills they want to learn and their motivation for being in the program at the beginning of the season, and then again at the end of the program. The therapeutic and transformative powers of gardening has become apparent over time, with respondents providing qualitative comments about their sense of wellbeing. Here are some quotes from program participants:



*"The skills you learn here apply to the rest of your life." -D*

*"It helped me to be part of a group that's positive, that's working towards something." -J.*

*The garden brings out the best in people." -L.*

*"You learn something new in the garden every year, every day." -B.*

*"I appreciate you for encouraging me to keep going when I wanted to quit. You guys, too. These guys told me to get with it and to work hard and I did." -R.*

*"We have the intent and purpose to expand on what we've learned, to make sure this garden isn't a dead-end." R.*

*"The garden course gives me something to look forward to every Monday." -V.*

*"It brought me back to simpler times with my grandparents." - D.*

*"Nature has a way of always being interesting. Giving it my undivided attention takes my mind off my surroundings." - M.*

Renée says working with the DoC has challenges, but not because the people involved are inherently challenging. Each facility has its own culture and each administration has its own rules. Some

elements of the program can be standardized; some are site specific. Safety and security sometimes limit the program and the resources they can offer. Communication can be challenging because of staff changes and people moving from facility to facility. Current restrictions do not permit TNGS staff to interact with people who were formerly

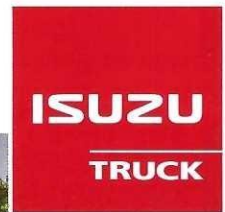


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incarcerated. However, they are currently working with a DoC task force to find ways to track the statistics around recidivism and whether the program helps people find work post-incarceration. A goal for 2020 is to compile a list of companies and green industry allies that would be interested in hiring people who have been through the program.

TNGS relies on green industry professionals to deliver their programs. They welcome guest presenters and anyone who might advise or wish to serve on their board. In-kind contributions of soil, compost, plant material, tools, equipment, and other supplies are always welcome and much needed.

TNGS is affiliated with the American Horticultural Therapy Association, Northeastern Organic Farming Association, and the Northeast Horticultural Therapy Network. 🌳

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