

# CONSERVATION DISTRICT ASSISTS WITH INMATE GARDEN

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Conservation districts across the nation are tasked with the need to save taxpayer dollars, and Harlan County Conservation has found a way to do just that, feed inmates and even teach a viable trade as well. The Harlan County Conservation District began a project to assist the local detention center in their existing garden operation to not only train prisoners in sound conservation practices but also to provide fruits and vegetables to supply the inmate cafeteria and cut taxpayer costs.

Harlan County Conservation District Chairman David Howard said, "We got involved originally through a request by the previous jailer and were happy to help because there is very little agriculture in Harlan. Every little way we can contribute and teach others is a big success," remarked Howard.

The conservation district and the detention center began working together in 2008 on the inmate garden. "We checked into grants and were able to purchase fruit trees, provide irrigation and contribute money towards the greenhouse. We also provide assistance in teaching irrigation and how to handle the crops," continued Howard.

Through assistance from the conservation district, the detention center has been provided with 250 apple and pear trees. The staple crops of the center however, have been beans and mostly potatoes. Harlan County Jailer BJ Burkhart commented on the need for a crop to feed a growing inmate population, "We had to figure out a way to feed all these inmates for 12 months a year. For us, potatoes were the answer."

The additional fruits and vegetables have also been incredibly helpful in the jail's cafeteria. Burkhart said, "The crops we grow in our inmate garden provide a better quality food than most detention



centers. Those inmates are usually served a 'TV style' dinner, and here we are able to give them bigger portions of healthy food that provides the inmates with a healthier lifestyle overall," Burkhart continued.

The Harlan County Conservation District has also organized and channeled specialists from the University of Kentucky to provide technical assistance to the center. The most current collaboration is looking at an alternative energy source to run their greenhouse. The greenhouse is currently powered by propane gas and has not been a cost efficient solution. Now the conservation district is working with UK and the detention center to explore other money saving energy options.

It was estimated in 2011 that the inmate garden saved taxpayers nearly \$9,000 that year and each year thereafter. This figure does not include savings on other crops such as beans. In 2015 however, the savings will be much greater due to an expected high yield fruit harvest.

Not only has this project saved money for the detention center

as well as taxpayers, but it has also taught many life lessons to those inmates who are fortunate enough to be able to participate in the program. These prisoners are educated on how to provide food for their families upon release. This unique skill set is especially beneficial in Eastern Kentucky where agriculture is waning. Burkhart notes, "Inmates here learn how to work in the garden, see the process and can use that whenever they get to where they are going. Hopefully on the outside they can apply the steps and be optimistic in the skills they have gained from the time they spent in here."



**TOP: Inmates work the garden on a clear morning.**  
Photo by Derrick Howard.

**ABOVE: The greenhouse that was donated from the high school houses many of the budding plants.**  
Photo By Susie Mavinidis