

Master Gardeners in their Communities

University of California Master Gardeners train in their respective counties of residence in a broad range of horticulture topics and after training they are required to volunteer a certain number of hours to achieve and maintain their certification. Many projects are available to Master Gardeners such as working with community and school gardens to improve their techniques or speaking to community groups on topics such as sustainable California landscaping. They also may choose to participate in a project that fits their education and interests. This was the case with University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) Alameda County Master Gardener Sue Lesica. Sue was approached by the Alameda County UCCE 4-H advisor, Dr. Charles Go, to participate in a community garden project at Camp Wilmont-Sweeney, an Alameda County juvenile detention camp for about 50 teenage boys age 15-18, located in San Leandro. Project GROW, "Gardening Rejuvenates Our Wellness", is a collaborative effort between Alameda County Juvenile Justice, Camp Wilmont-Sweeney, Guidance Clinic-Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services, UCCE Alameda County 4-H and Master Gardeners. GROW is structured to provide the youth with experiential learning in the areas of food growing and nutrition and provides them with opportunities to improve their social interactions with peers and adults. The youth experimented with various types of mulch to conserve water and build organic matter including straw and cocoa bean hulls. They also learned to sheet mulch with rolled cardboard to minimize weeding. A compost pile was created to recycle garden waste and the youth examined the different creatures which aid in decomposition.

The 1000 square foot garden grows in Sunset climate zone 16 which is described as the best agricultural climate in northern California. This was demonstrated last summer when the garden produced 35 watermelons which were enjoyed by the entire camp population. In addition to watermelon the summer garden produced green beans, cucumber, tomatoes, summer squash, sweet corn and strawberries. The winter garden has been planted with chard, Asian greens, arugula, sugar snap peas, beets, radishes, carrots, scallions, garlic, artichoke, romaine lettuce, red and green cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower. The youth also planted a cover crop in 300 square feet to add nitrogen and organic matter to the clay soil. Plans are underway to double the size of the garden and to add fruit trees, grape vines and blueberries.

The youth also have the opportunity to learn how to cook with their produce. The youth are then exposed to new foods and recipes that they may not be familiar with. Some of their favorites have been Chocolate Zucchini Cake, Radish Dip, Arugula Salad with pomegranate seeds and red wine vinaigrette and Chard and Carrot Terrine.

If you are in need of help with your garden project please contact the Alameda County Master Gardeners at 510-639-1275 or sclesica@ucdavis.edu