

A fresh start

Trying to beat a drug addiction is a huge challenge. Trying to detox whilst serving a prison sentence can be even more complex. But sometimes the simple things in life can help to make the difference...



Sorrel soon became a strong favourite.

Offenders recovering from substance misuse at HMP Rye Hill, Rugby, have been taking part in our first Garden Organic Master Gardener Programme to run in a prison. Robin Baxter was chosen to lead this project, launched in May last year, and he wanted to get the men involved excited about the prospect of growing their own food from the start. So on his first visit, Robin brought along a bag of home-grown salad for them to try. Now you may think this would hold little attraction for a group of men with addictions to illegal drugs such as heroin and cocaine, but this wasn't the case at all.

"I invited the lads to taste all of the different leaves," says Robin. "There was sorrel, pea shoots, dill, parsley and a dozen different varieties of lettuce. They were instantly hooked and wanted to know how to grow them themselves. If I had to pick a top leaf of the year, it would definitely be sorrel. If you have

been using substances for years it can dull your senses, but sorrel has a sharp, clean, fresh taste that the lads love."

The Rye Hill Garden Project is delivered by our Master Gardener programme team, working in conjunction with Substance Misuse Services (SMS) and G4S, which operates the prison. It is funded by Public Health England (Northamptonshire). This project offers an organic therapeutic horticultural intervention to offenders based in the recovery unit and is part of a wider schedule of interventions offered by SMS.

The main aims are to assist offenders' personal recoveries and to improve their health and wellbeing, whilst allowing them to develop new skills and progress towards lives free from reoffending. Robin works alongside Steve Hammond, a Horticultural Support Worker, on this project and from the beginning they believed the

key to achieving these goals would be encouraging the men to feel a sense of ownership of their new garden.

Getting off the ground

"We started with just a large area of grass, which used to be a football pitch, between two wings of the prison," says Robin. "It was a blank canvas, which gave the lads an opportunity to create the garden from scratch. The design evolved completely from their ideas. They decided exactly how the garden should look and what to grow in there.

"I only made one suggestion. I asked the men to look around at their surroundings. Everything was straight lines: the prison; bricks; bars; fences and walls. So I said let's create something different in this garden and make everything curved and flowing, where possible. I often stand back and think it is amazing what has been created here. It's not necessarily what I would have done, but it is better



A beautiful raised flower bed brightens up this prison garden.

because it is all the lads' own work."

There were a few practical issues to overcome before they could get growing though. When the prison was built, most of the top soil had been removed and replaced with road stone. This was covered with just a thin layer of sandy top soil. Rather than feeling defeated, Robin encouraged the men to think about solutions such as creating raised beds and installing a seating area in the worst affected patch.

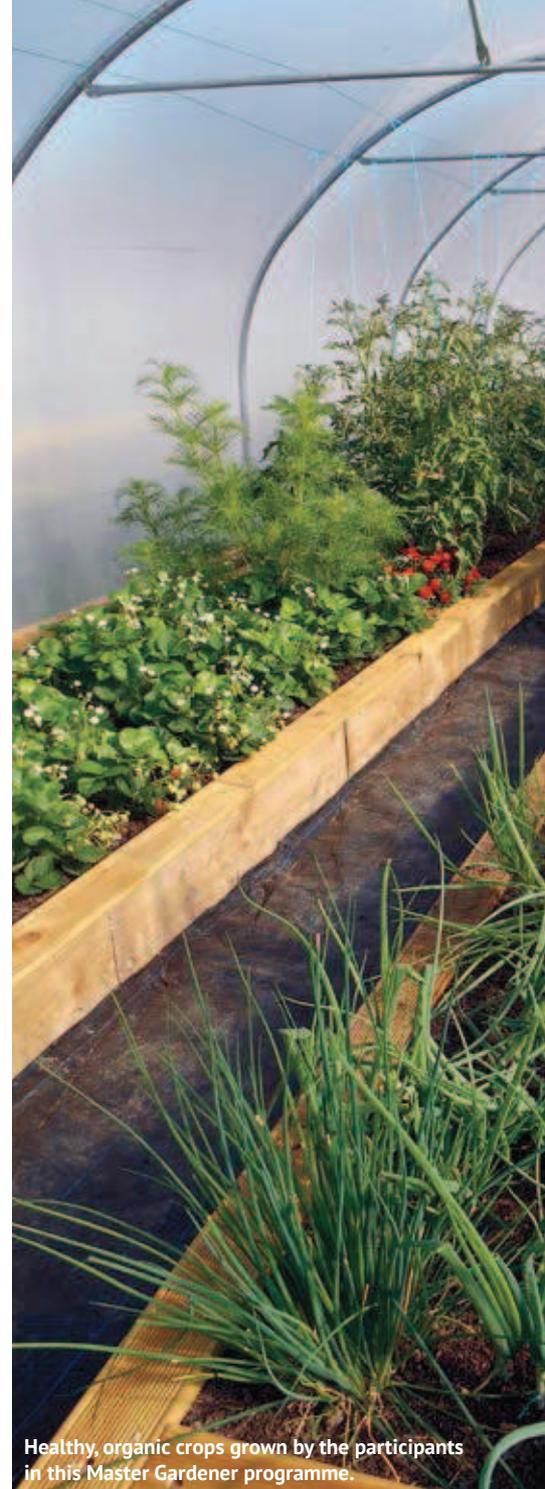
It also took time for the plans for the project to be approved by Rye Hill's security team and for a new Portakabin to be installed on the site to act as a base for garden project. In the meantime, Robin helped the men to start sowing seeds and gave them some basic training on subjects including crop rotation, soil types, weed

identification and organic methods. By July, the group was able to start constructing their design for the garden, which included the first raised beds, a polytunnel, a greenhouse and flower beds. They created curved pathways, like the branches of a tree, leading to the central seating area. Their plants raised from seed had flourished. The men had deliberately chosen crops that could be harvested and eaten raw, so they could take them back to the wing. Soon, they were tucking into home-grown organic produce including salads, carrots, spring onions and French beans.

“I enjoyed watching our salads grow from scratch and tasting organic (food).”



The new garden being constructed at HMP Rye Hill.



Healthy, organic crops grown by the participants in this Master Gardener programme.

Independent evaluation

The success of the Master Gardener programme at HMP Rye Hill has been independently evaluated by Coventry University. Its researchers discovered that participants in this organic therapeutic horticultural intervention have experienced a wide range of benefits, as follows:

Health and wellbeing

Participants and others report noticeable changes in both physical and emotional health and wellbeing, including:

- improved physical health – more appropriate sleeping patterns, eating healthier, less drug use, reduced need for medication and increased opportunity for fresh air and activity; and
- improved emotional and mental health – happier, calmer, talking, sharing and able to reflect on past behaviour.

“Since I've been on the gardens I feel better in myself and have been a lot happier. Since I joined the garden project it has led to me getting clean from drugs.”

Social

Participants report the social impact of the Master Gardener programme; this finding was validated by staff across the prison who also reported the changes relating to individuals.

These changes include:

- a sense of ownership in the aims and mission of the gardening project;
- a feeling of pride in their visible and tangible achievement;
- supportive relationships with each other, with staff involved



The garden is located on challenging ground.

Reaping the rewards

Robin says: “The men instantly looked better for getting a bit of sunshine and doing some physical work. They began thinking more about their diets and naturally started to care more about their health. One of the lads had hardly come out of his cell for three years. He had suffered from a lot of depression and shut himself away. But within a few weeks of joining us in the garden, he started attending the gym again, which gave him physical activity as well as being great for him socially.”

Staff from across the prison also noticed the participants becoming calmer, more willing to engage with them, talk about their achievements and keen to share this with others. With continued support from SMS and the garden project, several individuals stopped using illicit drugs and others

reduced their level of prescribed medication.

The men have also been thinking about making positive changes after being released from prison. They have learnt many new skills from the garden project and each of them has a personal portfolio of achievement, which may help to them to secure employment. But even if they never work in horticulture, many of them now have a new focus in life – free from drug use and crime – that may bring many unexpected benefits.

“When I get out of here I would go to an allotment,” said one of the participants. “This is something I can do with my daughter. It can give you a bond with your daughter. Improve your relationship. For me, this has meant keeping out of trouble.”

in the project and with the wider staff group;

- improved behaviour and compliance within prison;
- self-perception and self-confidence;
- the notion of an improved status and a move away from a stigmatised identity;
- the importance of establishing and building trust; and
- the potential for beneficial impact on family relationships.

Skills base and employability

The research team observed:

- participants enjoy learning new skills – both practical skills in the garden and developing their skills in the classroom;
- participants and staff recognised the development of skills that would be transferable to the world of work and allow or enhance opportunities for participation;
- peer-led learning.

Environment

Participants reported the overall positive benefits of working in the garden, which included:

- positive attitudes towards being outside in all weathers and the opportunity to work in the fresh air;
- being away from the influence of drugs; and
- being engaged in meaningful activity.

Desistance (cessation of offending)

Whilst we can see evidence in the data that this consideration is not uniform across all participants, we can also see evidence of participant's involvement in the Master Gardener Programme has facilitated consideration of making changes in their offending behaviour on leaving Rye Hill.