

GARDEN

Continued from A1

'They are eager to help'

welcome.

Meyer said she doesn't ask what the men did to merit prison, preferring to deal with them as she encounters them now. Otherwise, she said, you couldn't do the job.

She's taught pilates in the women's unit, Meyer said, adding she found the men in maximum more cordial and easier to deal with.

"They see things that need to be done, like moving the picnic table into the sun," she said. "You just mention something and it gets done."

"They are eager to help," she said.

Vera Bowen, past president of the Federated Garden Clubs of Rhode Island, said the yard gets full sun virtually all summer, though by now about a third is in shadow by late afternoon. When the prison was heated by coal-fired boilers, the site was the dumping ground for used coal.

Now its harvest of strawberries, zucchini, lettuces and other vegetables and herbs are used in the prison cafeteria; the joke in the garden was that when the hot peppers hit the menu, the inmates thought there was a new cook.

Gardening is a challenging pastime in a conventional setting, but in a prison it gets more complicated. Tomato plants needed to be held up with stakes so their fruit didn't touch the ground, but pointed wooden stakes in a prison yard were a clear safety issue; horticulture and penology compromised on flimsier bamboo sticks.

The compost pile in the corner had to be monitored, lest it get high enough that an in-

mate could use it as a ramp to jump the wall, even though the wall was topped with razor wire and there was another razor-wired fence on the other side.

Roberta Richman, the Department of Corrections' assistant director for rehabilitative services, said the garden program was specifically set up for prisoners serving life without parole. She acknowledged that giving such men a chance to walk in a sunny garden would, at first glance, seem misguided.

But the department didn't start the garden because it wanted to give the inmates something, she said. In a way, it approved it so the department had something it could take away.

Life-without-parole prisoners are a challenge to prisons. In Rhode Island, they're serving the harshest sentence the state can mete out, evidence that they're unable to follow the most basic and important rules of society. That inability to follow the rules means they wind up in prison, one of the most strictly regimented environments on earth.

The ACI has virtually no programs for the life-without-parole segment of the population, Richman said. The department's priority is to concentrate on those inmates who will, sooner or later, be released, improving public safety by creating at least the possibility that they'll be less likely to commit new crimes when they get out. It would be a waste of limited resources to give a slot in one of those programs to someone who is never going to go free, she said.

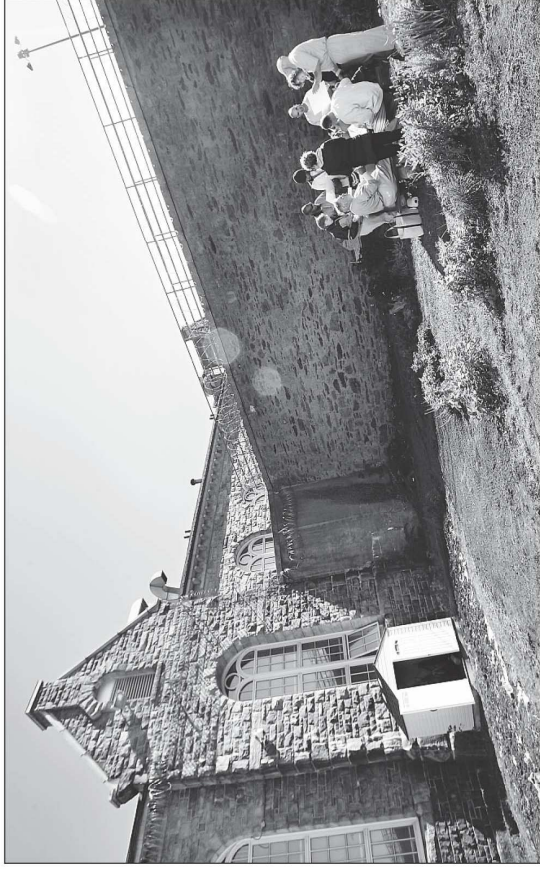
"They are going to live and die in prison," she said.

Then there is the issue of safety in the prison. One of the ACI staff's main jobs is to keep inmates safe from each other as well as protecting the men and women who work there. A credible disciplinary system



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Volunteer Terry Meyers, a master gardener at the University of Rhode Island, helps out as some inmates sketch the flowers and plants they have grown.



A group of inmates gathers around a picnic table with the women who teach them.

is vital to reaching that goal, she said.

Inmates who expect to be released have a reason to be-

"We have 32 inmates serving life without parole," she said. "As a group, they have nothing to lose. It's in our best interest. It makes them less likely to present a problem from an institutional perspective."

So far, the project has been at no cost to the state. The instructors are volunteers, seeds and plants were donated by individuals and by URI's Master Gardener Program and the Federated Garden Clubs of Rhode Island. The shed used to store the garden tools was donated by the Catholic Diocese of Providence.

Richman said the agency wants gardens at other units in the ACI. She said plans are being drawn up for one in the women's unit and another in minimum security, where inmates' families will help plant them and provide inmates and their families with a quiet area to meet.

"We're going to do it everywhere," she said.

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