

A close-up photograph of a flower bud, likely a squash blossom, showing the intricate, layered structure of the yellow and orange petals. The flower is attached to a green, hairy stem. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

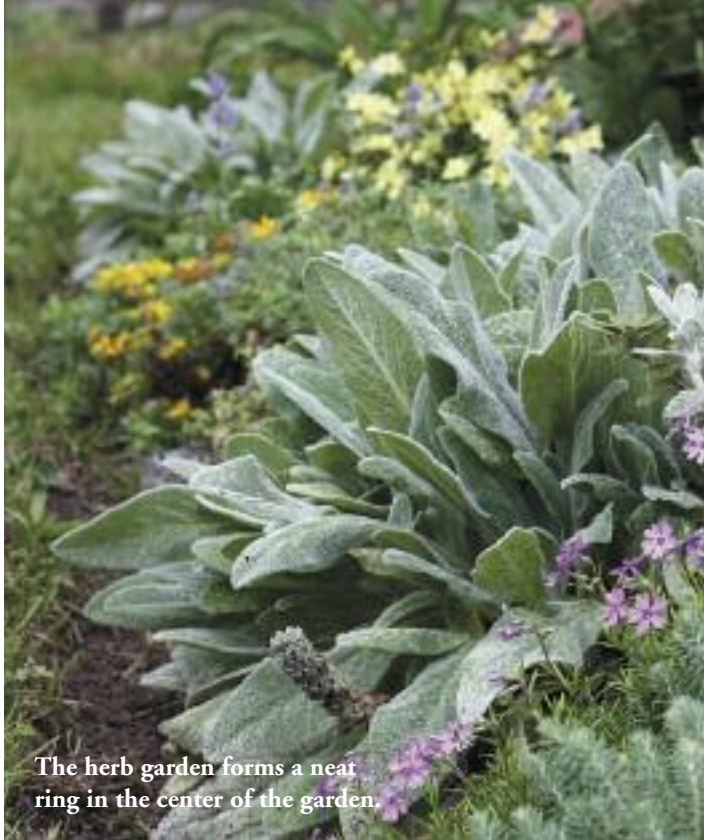
# *edible* RHODY®

Celebrating the Bounty of Rhode Island, Season by Season  
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## *Hidden Garden*

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The herb garden forms a neat ring in the center of the garden.

## HIDDEN GARDEN

STORY & PHOTOS  
BY CHRISTINE CHITNIS

## EARTH BEHIND BARS

*A Garden Offers Respite  
in the Most Unlikely of Places*

Rudy holds out a handful of perfectly ripe heirloom tomatoes and boasts, “We grow the best tomatoes you have ever tasted. That’s a promise.” In the background, a bountiful garden is on display, with its late summer crop ready for harvest.

The herbs and vegetables are planted neatly in rows, while the flowers in the butterfly garden grow wild and whimsical. The air smells of rich soil and fragrant basil. The atmosphere is serene. Were it not for the towering chain link fences topped with coils of sharp razor wire surrounding this particular plot of land, it would be any gardener’s delight.

This otherwise tranquil organic garden is located inside the compound of the Men’s Maximum Security Prison on the Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI) campus in Cranston.

### AN IDEA TAKES SEED

Entering its second year, the ACI’s garden program was the brainchild of gardening activists Kate Lacouture, a landscape architect; Vera Brown, past president of the Rhode Island Federation of Garden Clubs; and Terry Meyer, a cartographer.

The women, who together form the group Garden Time, extensively researched prison gardens, even paying a visit to the Rikers Island garden program in New York City, before approaching the ACI with their idea. They suggested that the program could begin in the Women’s Minimum Security Prison, which seemed like the safest place to start. Garden Time was in for a bit of a surprise.

When Warden James Weeden, who presides over the Men’s Max facility, and Chaplain Martha Paone, who works with men sentenced to life in prison, got wind of the project, it immediately sparked their interest. They had been on the lookout for programs that might benefit the small number of inmates serving life without parole. It was their enthusiasm for the project that brought it to the Men’s Max, and their support continues to be crucial to the project’s success.

“None of the programs in prison are for the lifers,” explains Meyer. “Any programs that exist are for the men and women who are

going to eventually be back in society. Chaplain Paone was trying to think of something that would bring some light back into the lifers’ eyes—give them a bit of hope. She talked us into the fact that it would be OK to work with men who were lifers. When we got it in our minds to start this project, we weren’t thinking of working with men ... and we certainly weren’t thinking Men’s Max.”

### PLANNING STAGES

In February 2011, with the ground still frozen solid, the three women began planning their garden with a group of 11 men serving life sentences. Having developed an in-depth curriculum, the team covers topics such as garden design, soil care, organic gardening methods, plant biology, wildlife biodiversity and beekeeping.

The men put their knowledge to use, drawing up garden design plans, and researching what types of plants they would like to grow. The inmates bring their own diverse backgrounds to the table, helping to shape the project as it grows.

“In our small group we have former landscape contractors, civil engineers and building contractors,” marvels Lacouture. “Many of the men also have gardening history, whether they gardened with their grandma or watched their mom tend the family garden.”

When the ground began to thaw in late March, the group set to work amending the soil. By tilling, mulching and adding compost, they were able to turn the previously barren patch of ground into rich, fertile beds. “It was tough work, very physical,” remembers Page, an inmate, “but it brought back memories of being at home, gardening with my grandmother and family. I came to enjoy even the most physical of days in the garden because it was quality time spent in a peaceful place.”

With the arrival of spring, the men began planting in succession, focusing on high-yielding crops that could feed the entire 400+ population of the prison. First in the ground were spinach, arugula, lettuce and sugar snap peas. The herb garden began to take shape with basil, oregano and dill forming a neat ring in the center of the garden.

A prisoner harvesting with a member of Garden Time.



Garden produce is given directly to the prison kitchen. Crops must feed 400+ or they can't be used.

Emphasis was put on growing flavorful crops that can feed a large population—herbs, and fresh vegetables including zucchini, green beans, turnips, collard greens, kale, peppers, squash, cucumbers and tomatoes.

In addition, the men planted a butterfly garden, and surprisingly, for the first time in recent memory, the prison grounds are now home to hummingbirds and Monarch butterflies.

The group encountered unique challenges along the way—could potentially dangerous tools necessary for gardening be allowed on the prison grounds? Could wire, strong enough to be climbed, be used to form a trellis? Would the men be allowed to water without the supervision of the group leaders, who are there only twice a week?

Thanks to Warden Weeden's support, plus some innovation, solutions were reached. Tools are allowed, though carefully monitored with a login system. The men were given watering rights. And as for the trellis, it's constructed out of yarn.

### FIRST HARVEST

The first harvest took place in late spring and yielded enough bags of lettuce, spinach and peas to make salad for the evening's dinner. Whatever harvest the garden produces is given directly to the prison kitchen, which incorporates the crops into the inmate's meals.

This presents a unique challenge—whatever is grown on this small plot of land must feed the 400+ population of the prison, otherwise it may not be used.

"Unlike gardening to feed your family, where you want to be harvesting green beans throughout the growing season, we need green beans for 400+ people harvested all at once," explains Lacouture. "It's a different way of thinking about gardening."

After the garden's initial success, more garden projects are in the works for the ACI campus. A children's visitation garden and vegetable garden are planned for the Men's Minimum Facility, and it is Garden Time's hope that they will soon be able to serve the women's population as well.

As for the Men's Max garden, the plan is to produce an even higher-yielding garden this season, building on what the men learned during the first year. Plans include more efficient crop rotation, increased companion planting, and timing the harvest for a longer growing season. The men have dreams of paths and stepping-stones, intricate flowerbed designs and fruit trees.

This prison is their home, where they will live for the rest of their days, and perhaps because of that fact the men realize what is at stake here.

"If this program is successful," explains Franky, a young lifer, "they will allow other good programs to come in for the lifers. Not too many people give us a chance but here, in the garden, we're just normal people, being productive, learning new skills, and bringing life to the earth." eR

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Christine Chitnis is a Providence-based freelance writer and photographer. Her first book, *Markets of New England* (The Little Bookroom, 2011), highlights 50 of the region's most vibrant, unique and thriving farmers' markets and art events. Visit her at [christinechitnis.com](http://christinechitnis.com).

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