

THE PRISON GARDEN EMPOWERING WOMEN TO PURSUE GROWTH



Behind a women's prison facility in Atlanta, there's a garden about a quarter of an acre in size. Despite its small area, it produces plenty of blackberries, tomatoes, peppers and more—enough to feed the women growing the food, as well as a nearby community. Situated between two buildings, the garden is surrounded by pollinators that are as beautiful as they are practical.

"You can actually look at the garden, and that in itself can be meditative and healing, just seeing something natural growing that you put your love and work into that's thriving and doing so well," says Nikki Jones, who was formerly incarcerated at the facility, where she was released last month. "It's just a reminder that you're worth something and you can make something beautiful."

Jones, whose name has been changed to protect her privacy, served the majority of a 12-year sentence at the women's correctional facility. At the eight-year mark, she was moved to the minimum-security prison. In 2018, she learned about a new prison farm program that Grassroots Growers Alliance (GGA), an Atlanta-based nonprofit, was launching. Her interest was immediately piqued. Jones grew up on her grandfather's large-scale farm in Georgia that produced a variety of crops, including cotton and corn. "I wasn't really thinking like, inner city, small gardens to feed a community. I was interested, though, because it took me back to my roots of how I grew up," she says.

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According to [a 2017 study](#) by the National Commission on Correctional Health Care, women in prisons report high rates of mental illnesses and receive inadequate treatment. They're also woefully underprepared to return to society. While some might not feel sympathetic toward incarcerated people—the facility where Jones served has people who committed anything from violent to drug crimes—the farm program by GGA works to address both of those issues. The garden offers an outlet for people who are incarcerated to improve their mental health and job-training opportunities while also supporting a community.

When the women finally planted the garden in 2019, they had no idea that a deadly pandemic was less than a year away. As COVID-19 spread across the US in the spring of 2020, they grew to appreciate what the garden had to offer even more.

At this center, the women can wear their own clothes and have access to cellphones. Pre-pandemic, they were allowed to go shopping for food and toiletries (up to \$25) once a week off-site. But once the lockdowns took effect, the women could no longer go on their weekly shopping excursion. The food they were served, Jones recalls, was abysmal. "I'm not going to say you're going to die in there from a lack of nutrition, but you're definitely going to suffer health-wise because of the limited amount of nutrition that you do get or the limited amount of food," she says. "We were all losing weight. A lot of us started developing health issues, like our hair was falling out. Our gut was upset a lot."

Having access to a portion of the garden's crops became that much more meaningful. The women learned about the nutritional benefits of the fruits and vegetables they cultivated, as well as how to prepare the produce—in recipes that ranged from soups to drinks—and how to cook them in a microwave. "That really saved us," she says.

It also helped keep the women connected to a world outside the facility's walls. The produce they grew not only provided food for the incarcerated women but also for residents of the local Thomasville Heights community. For that reason, the women dubbed the garden the "Give Back Garden." For Jones, that charitable aspect was paramount. "Of course, I'm paying my debt for the crime I committed by serving my time. However, I want to positively impact the lives around me rather than just being isolated, incarcerated and just serving a punishment," she says. "So, it was the first opportunity that I saw that I was able to do something that allowed me to help other people in the community that might be less fortunate or just might not have access to fresh garden items, being in a city."

While the women's prison gardening project is one of the GGA's latest to launch, it's certainly not the only one the organization oversees. Founded by Tania Herbert in 2019, GGA seeks to share hyperlocal produce with under-served communities while also educating community members about growing their own food.



The organization grew out of Herbert's role as the director of the urban agriculture program at the [Paideia School](#), a private school in Atlanta's Druid Hills neighborhood, a predominantly white, affluent area known for its Frederick Law Olmstead-designed chain of parks. It's a role Herbert carved out for herself a decade ago when she, then a parent to a child enrolled in the school, worked with home owners in the neighborhood to create urban farms in their backyards that the students could tend to. "Someone said that they didn't want to pay their landscaper anymore to mow their backyard. So, we were like, 'Hey, do you want to put it to more productive use?' And they were very excited about that," says Herbert, who is set to retire from that role this summer.

When the backyard gardens began producing, Herbert donated the best of it to organizations that work to feed the local community, such as [Urban Recipe](#) and [Intown Collaborative Ministries](#), saving the rest for students to use in cooking classes. "And, if it was really bad, we would give it to the farm animals, the chickens," she says.

Herbert jumped at the opportunity to partner with an elementary school in Atlanta's Thomasville Heights neighborhood, located in the southeastern part of the city. It's a neighborhood, she says, without major grocery stores and a median household income of \$11,000. The school is closing at the end of the year, at which point the farm will move to a new home at a nearby middle school.

While there are plenty of farming programs at schools across the country, Herbert believes the power of interwoven connections strengthens a community. The farm program at the women's prison facility, the result of a partnership between the GGA, [Trellis Horticultural Therapy Alliance](#) and [Living On Purpose Atlanta](#), might be the GGA's most transformational—and ambitious—program yet. It aims to teach the incarcerated women, many of whom are mothers, how to grow produce and

prepare them for when they leave prison and return to society and their families. They're given the chance to participate in hands-on farming classes with high school students from Paideia School. It's a rich experience for both the students and the women, with the two groups learning from and alongside each other.

While the high school students had stereotypes of incarcerated people, the incarcerated women had stereotypes of them, too, says Herbert. "I think they thought that we would be judging them, that we thought we had a picture in our mind of what someone was like when they were in prison. And when we came together in these workshops, it just all fell away. It was just all gone," she says. "All those stereotypes just went out the window and we just grew together and learned together. And then the super beautiful thing that came out of it was that they were amazing farmers." Additionally, the woman can take classes in a range of subjects such as personal finance and agricultural training.

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"What often happens is, when people are incarcerated, they are disconnected from the outside world completely. And they don't have access to skills-based training," says Herbert. "We are providing them with job skills. We are connecting them to outside communities. We are building relationships with our students and teachers in our school."

When they leave the facility, graduates of the farm program (a total of 20 so far) are offered support and given access to a sliding-scale CSA box from Paideia if they stay in the Atlanta area.

When Jones was released, she moved to south Georgia to be near family. She's not working in an agricultural job, but the lessons from her time tending to the prison's garden have stayed with her. During her job search, she threw herself into her home garden, where she and her brother grow okra—a plant she appreciates for its ease of growing—and peppers. Tending to the garden was empowering, and it helped build her up as a woman. It also taught her how to sustain herself. "That's something nobody could ever take from us now," says Jones.