

Seneca North: Willard inmates learn to make a garden grow

There wasn't much to work with in those early days in 2001: a set of rusty bed springs and a cantankerous tractor.

That was 12 years ago at the Willard Drug Treatment Center, west of Ovid. The plan was to turn a few acres into a garden. After a ll, there was plenty of help. Willard caters to about 800 low-level drug offenders.

Most people know Willard as a former hospital serving the mentally ill. The hospital closed in 1995. The drug treatment facility opened about that same time.

Inmates, many from rural areas without the slightest gardening experience, are stunned that one can turn a tiny seed -- courtesy of Harris Seed of Rochester -- into a productive plant and that many seeds can become a lush crop. Men perform the garden work three days a week, and women tend the garden on two days.

The inmates see none of the locally grown produce on their dinner plates. (Their food is trucked in from outside the treatment center.)

The correction officers who oversee the project must see produce in their sleep.

Off the 23-acre farm come bushels of tomatoes, potatoes, squash, beans and so on. All of it is ticketed for food pantries and agencies serving the needy from Rochester to the Southern Tier Food Bank, food pantries in Ovid, Interlaken and elsewhere.

The only thing asked of a receiving agency is that the agency does its own trucking.

Jeff VanLiew of MacDougall, a 48-year-old correction officer, has been with the garden program since its inception in 2001. He happily reported that the old bed springs and balky tractor are just a memory. As the garden project grew, more modern equipment has been added.

VanLiew, who retires shortly, reports that a whopping 1.5 million pounds plus of produce has been grown over the past 11 years and given freely to food pantries and others serving the needy. After the more than 60,000 pounds of produce turned out

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in 2001, the garden's first year of operation, production hit a record 240,915 pounds in 2008.

"You really never know how you are going to do," VanLiew said. "It all depends on the weather."

For example, 2008 offered a perfect growing season. "We never had a better one." The 2011 growing season, which just ended, added 134,125 pounds.

VanLiew has no plans to enlarge the operation. "We have all we can handle now."

He's not wrong.

Another project that VanLiew and others draw attention to is the production of maple syrup. Crews have tapped Willard's maple trees for the past 10 years and produced 414.5 gallons of maple syrup in those 10 years. Maple syrup also is donated to agencies that serve the needy.

The top year of the past 10 was 2008 when crews produced more than 63 gallons of syrup. Officials have turned the old laundry building at Willard into a sugar shack and it is there that sap is converted into maple syrup.

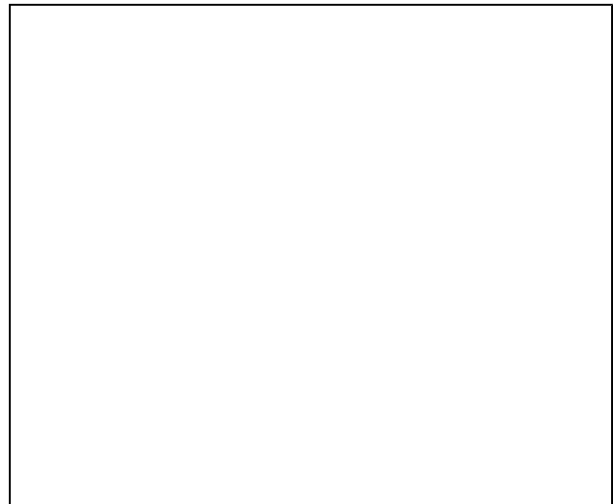
Correction officer Terry Dyson, 57, with 27 years as a correction officer, said the garden project, which she has recently joined, "is the best job I have ever had."

Some of her charges tell her they intend to do some gardening once they are freed to

return home.

Neil Chaffie covers eastern and central Schuyler County in his Seneca North column. Submit ideas to Neil Chaffie, P. O. Box 543, Ovid, NY 14521; (607) 403-4112; or e-mail neilchaffie@yahoo.com.

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