Sheriff: Vegetable Garden Saves County Bushels

Hankins Hopes New Freezers Will Help Garden Goods Last

BY KEN LITTLE
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It's harvest time at gardens overseen by the Greene County Sheriff's Department that provide nutritious meals to jail and workhouse inmates, along with an appetizer of big savings for taxpayers.

With the recent acquisition of two large military surplus refrigerated containers, Sheriff Pat Hankins' goal is for vegetables grown by inmates to be available until the next growing season, he said.

It looks to be a bumper crop this growing season, Hankins said, despite earlier concerns about lack of precipitation.

"It kind of turned around with all this (recent) rain," he said.

One workhouse gardening crew was busy Monday loading cabbage into bins that will be stored in one of the refrigerated containers and freezers at the jail.



SUN PHOTO BY KEN LITTLE

It's almost harvest time at the cornfield near the county workhouse on land donated by the Holston United Methodist Home for Children. The garden is one of several overseen by the Greene County Sheriff's Department that provides a quantity of healthy vegetables for inmates at the county jail and workhouse and saves taxpayer money. Visiting the inmate-tended garden on Monday, from left, were Chief Deputy Ray Allen Jr., Holston President/CEO Bradley Williams, Holston Vice President of Development and Church Relations Rev. Charles A. Hutchins, and Sheriff Pat Hankins.

"We've got all of our freezers full inside the detention center," Hankins said.

VARIETY OF VEGETABLES

Potatoes, corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, green beans, squash, peppers and zucchini are grown in the gardens.

Two are off West Summer Street, near the workhouse on land owned by the Holston United Methodist Home for Children. Another, which includes three acres of potatoes, is along the Nolichuckey River. Other vegetable gardens are in Camp Creek and off Foxford Road.

With about 400 inmates to feed at the jail and workhouse, the savings are substantial.

"It cuts down on expense tremendously. We normally run out of (vegetables) in January," Hankins said. "Now we've got these other two freezers and we've hopefully got enough stored to last from season to season."

Darrell Stills, sheriff's department maintenance supervisor, is in charge of the workhouse gardening crews. Stills agreed it's been a good growing season so far.

"We've already got over 200 bushels of beans," along with bumper crops of cabbage and tomatoes, Stills said.

"Corn is just now fixing to come in a couple weeks," he said.

About 17 minimum-security inmates tend to the gardens.

"It would be hard to put a price tag on it. There's no telling how much we are saving," Chief Deputy Ray Allen Jr. said.

HOLSTON HELPS OUT

Bradley Williams, president and CEO of Holston United Methodist Home for Children, said Holston officials are happy to help put food on the table at the jail and workhouse.

"We love being able to partner with the sheriff's department for two reasons," Williams said. "We like the idea of helping to rehabilitate inmates and secondly, we are excited to reduce food costs for our county, which benefits the taxpayers. We're blessed to have such community support for Holston Home, so we enjoy giving back to our community."

Williams and Hankins also talked about the possibility of horse manure from Holston being spread by inmates in the gardens as fertilizer.

Further discussion is anticipated.

The refrigerated containers enable some vegetables to be frozen for later use and provide more of a variety of vegetables on the jail and workhouse menu.

"We'll get another crop of beans in, cabbage is coming in and so is the zucchini," Hankins said. "The way we're doing it now, (inmates) are liking it much better than cabbage, cabbage, cabbage."

The workhouse garden was re-introduced to the sheriff's department in 2008 by former Sheriff Steve Burns. There had been other gardens tended by inmates in the past, but the practice was discontinued at some point.