Inmates' Labor Yields Annual Vegetable Bounty

BY KEN LITTLE
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The fruits of inmate labor will help feed the Greene County Detention Center and workhouse population this winter.

Taxpayers will also benefit from this year's bumper crop of vegetables, grown on two plots totaling about 12 acres near the county workhouse and on land in Camp Creek.

Two military-grade freezers obtained by the Greene County Sheriff's Department from the government last year are used to store this year's crop, which includes cabbage, squash, beans, tomatoes, corn, cucumbers, zucchini and even peppers.

The Holston United Methodist Home for Children adjoins the workhouse property, and allows the county to use several undeveloped acres for the garden.

Officials from the county and Holston Home inspected the yield last week.



SUN PHOTO BY KEN LITTLE

Standing by two freezer trailers loaded with vegetables grown by Greene County Workhouse inmates on land that includes acreage owned by the Holston United Methodist Home for Children are, from left, sheriff's Capt. John Key, Holston President/CEO Bradley Williams, workhouse maintenance supervisor Darrell Stills, Sheriff Pat Hankins, Holston Vice President of Development Charles A. Hutchins and jail administrator Roger Willett.

"This is produce we have actually grown with the help of Holston that we will use this winter," said Roger Willett, county jail and workhouse administrator.

Sheriff Pat Hankins said that with a total daily average of about 400 inmates in both facilities, the vegetable crop helps the county maximize its food budget while also providing nutritious meals and saving taxpayers money.

The two freezers were delivered from a Gulfport, Miss., naval yard in early 2015.

"The military is always giving away surplus equipment it won't use," sheriff's Capt. Wesley Holt said at the time. "These came available at the naval yard. I put in for them, and we got them."

Transporting the freezers to Greene County cost $1,650. They provide a means of preserving the vegetables until they are used.

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"With these two freezers, we can go from season to season," Hankins said.

Capt. John Key, second-in-command at the jail and workhouse, said the homegrown vegetables cut the cost of each inmate's meals 50 to 60 cents per day.

That comes out to annual savings of about $73,000.

The Holston Home is glad to donate the land for use in the inmate garden.

"It's our way of giving back to the community. This community has been great giving back to the kids, so any way we can give back to make the dollars stretch a little for the county, we're happy to do it," said Bradley Williams, Holston Home president and CEO.

Despite an unusually warm summer, this year's vegetable crop turned out well.

The freezers store about 500 bushels of beans and about 5,000 head of cabbage.



SUN PHOTO BY KEN LITTLE

Bags of chopped cucumbers, zucchini and containers full of tomatoes and other vegetables will help feed inmates at the Greene County Detention Center in the coming months. They are stored in two former U.S. Navy freezer trailers obtained free of charge by the sheriff's department from the U.S. government.

The gardens have another benefit.

"It also gives our inmates an opportunity to go out and work," Key said.

Most inmates take pride in their gardening skills, as is evidenced by the successful crop.

The vegetables help provide more of a varied diet for inmates, Hankins said. Tomatoes, for instance, are very versatile.

"We can take all these frozen tomatoes and make spaghetti sauce," he said.

Other inmates assist in the process. When a crop of beans is brought in, female inmates help process them for storage, Hankins said.

"I hope it will take us through (the winter and spring)," he said. "We still have to buy a lot of things, too, but this supplements it."

Williams said that some of the produce also finds its way onto the menus at Holston Home.

"They share some of the excess with Holston Home, so the kids get to eat some of the benefits of the garden," he said.

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.

Now that the seed has been planted and the freezers enable the long-term storage of vegetables, the inmate garden is here to stay, officials say.

The quality of the food served at the jail and workhouse has "improved greatly," Hankins said.

"(Inmates) do like it a lot better. They will tell you it's better now," he said.