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Inmates cultivate moss — and new interests in life

By Nick Perry

Seattle Times staff reporter

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Inmate Jeff Curbow, 40, says he improved a watering system for the moss after others built a special hut for it at Cedar Creek Corrections Center in Littlerock, Thurston County.



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Evergreen State College scientist Nalini Nadkarni admires a birdhouse that an inmate at Cedar Creek Corrections Center made with moss and a gourd.

LITTLEROCK, Thurston County — It doesn't require sharp tools to tend. It grows in the darkest, starkest environments. It pops with color — and for some, hope.

It's moss. Perhaps the perfect plant for prisons. At least that's what Evergreen State College scientist Nalini Nadkarni figured when she enlisted inmates at the Cedar Creek Corrections Center to help with her moss research.

For two years, a procession of prisoners have watered, rotated, weighed and collected data on trays of forest moss. Some have considered it another pointless chore. But others have filled notebooks with data and remembered scientific names. One former prisoner even took to keeping moss under his bed for closer daily observation.

The point, Nadkarni said, is to find out whether moss can be commercially grown for florists. She wants to put a stop to the organized gangs that illegally strip it from Northwest forests — a problem that's gotten so bad that the U.S. Forest Service is enacting new rules to limit harvests and give local landowners better control.

Her "kooky" idea of enlisting prisoners came from wondering who had the time and space to grow moss and the need for more interaction with nature. When she contacted prison officials, she was surprised to find them receptive.

The minimum-security men's prison, in a state forest 23 miles southwest of Olympia, is home to about 400 people who have four years or less remaining on their sentences.

Since arriving 18 months ago, Superintendent Dan Pacholke has been transforming the prison into a model of sustainability: In the past year, prisoners grew and ate 7,200 pounds of organic vegetables, collected thousands of gallons of rainwater and recycled 27 tons of garbage. They also tended a worm farm and looked after the prison turtle.

"Gardening is a nurturing kind of activity; it's calming," Pacholke said. "It's a nice complement to the overall mission of the facility."

It's also a way to save money and keep prisoners occupied, he said.

Do prison officials worry that inmates could put their skills to illegal use?

"The ones that grew mushrooms and pot, they're excellent. They really know how to grow stuff," said Georgia Harvey, the correctional-program manager. "They're my best gardeners; they are excellent gardeners."

"Trial and error"

On a recent visit to the prison, Nadkarni showed up wearing different socks ("chaos theory," she explained), bubbling with energy and curiosity. A self-described Hindu-Jew, she has a doctorate in forest ecology from the University of Washington, a fascination with life in the treetops and a determination to share her love of science with ordinary people.

She was escorted to the greenhouse, where inmate Jeff Curbow was tending the plants and moss, for token prison wages of about 35 cents an hour. Nadkarni admired a gourd covered in dry moss that a former prisoner made.

Curbow said he rotates the moss once a month. To replicate natural conditions, inmates used to capture rainwater that had dripped through nearby trees by using funnels and two-liter Pepsi bottles, he said. They had to stop when the trees were cut down.

"Growing stuff is all trial and error," said Curbow, who'll be released next summer after serving several years for burglary. "You pick up a little stuff each year and it grows better."

Curbow said he repaired and improved a watering system for the moss, after previous inmates built a special hut for it.

"We experimented with how we could grow it in the best conditions," former inmate Wayne Hudspeth explained later. "What we did is we started it out in the greenhouse, and we knew it

couldn't be under the direct sunlight, so we put it under shaded tables. But it was too hot and humid. So we built a little shelter and made sure we watered them every day to make them stay moist."

Hudspeth, who served time for theft, said he took out books on moss and was amazed to discover there are hundreds of varieties growing in the Pacific Northwest and that a single plant can live for generations. He started observing moss in his room.

"I'd put some in the window, then come in for lunch, then put some under my bed and in different places in the room to see if the growth was different," he said. "And it was."

Hudspeth kept his notes away from other inmates working with the moss. "I didn't want to influence them by telling them what I thought was going on," he said. "In case they were seeing things differently than I was."

Nadkarni said she was astonished when Hudspeth came up with such good ideas about how to conduct objective research.

"The turning point for me was volunteer-appreciation night at the prison," Nadkarni said. "Wayne spoke about the moss-growing project, saying, 'It gives me hope and will help sustain me when I get out of here.' I was bowled over he felt so strongly about it."

Seeking grants

Nadkarni said the money for her moss research is running out, but she's applying for more grants. She thinks moss can probably be grown commercially if people are prepared to pay a premium for sustainability. The biggest drawback? It grows very slowly.

Curbow said that when he gets out next summer, he hopes to run his parents' Orting farm and to perhaps build garden shelters and gazebos.

Hudspeth, meanwhile, is also determined to stay straight. He's landed a supervisory job at a mushroom farm in Lacey and has employed several other former inmates. He's also taking horticulture classes at South Puget Sound Community College.

"I hope they get funding because I'd truly like to be ... a part of that," Hudspeth said. "I was very excited about it, and I still am."

Nick Perry: 206-515-5639 or nperry@seattletimes.com

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