

Master Gardening for the Women's Community Correctional Center Inmates



Photo (left to right): Lani-Kailua Outdoor Circle Members, Kaoru Harada, O'ahu Master Gardeners Janet Onopa and Jamie Toraasen, Betsy Connors, and Cheryl Eng Link.

Beginnings

The Lani-Kailua Outdoor Circle (LKOC) is an organization that for over a hundred years has promoted healthy beautiful natural outdoor spaces on O'ahu. They are well known for implementing legislation banning billboards in Hawai'i, preserving beautiful trees, planting and maintaining public spaces, and preserving view planes (notably, stopping development of the slopes of Diamond Head crater). They have also been instrumental in stopping development of environmentally important wetlands and protecting native bird and animal habitats.



In 1999, the LKOC spearheaded a plant nursery project from the wreckage of an old classroom in a gully within the Kailua Women's Community Correctional Center (WCCC) grounds. About 15 years ago they gathered community resources and developed a hydroponic lettuce farm within the nursery. The lettuce is sold to Foodland stores, while also supplying the WCCC kitchens. Adjacent to the hydroponic beds, they have a diverse plant nursery that supplies extra vegetables and

herbs for the inmates, while raising trees and plants for Arbor Day give-away events and plant booth sales for the Outdoor Circle. Just outside the nursery is a breadfruit grove, a lei garden, other fruit trees, and a herd of 4 goats.

“Hydro Crew”

In the parlance of the WCCC, the women inmates working in the nursery are called the “Hydroponics Crew”, or “Hydro” in WCCC slang. Every inmate working in the nursery wears a bright red T-shirt with “HYDROPONICS” written on the back. ‘Hydro’ women are all low-security and allowed higher degrees of freedom than most inmates. Many of them are on the cusp of being released from the WCCC. Working ‘Hydro’ is a privilege, and they all have a strong interest in farming and advancing their agricultural knowledge and skills, with an eye on developing “green skills” that will translate to satisfying work once they are released. Because they are gradually moving up and out of the corrections system, there is a steady and gradual turnover in who is working in the nursery, and the knowledge and skills for hydroponic farming are diligently passed from one team leader to the next, and new women coming in as workers are taught by their peers.

The Outdoor Circle folks who developed this nursery and farm with the WCCC leadership have faced a problem: the volunteers managing things are gradually “aging out”. They needed more volunteers to keep it running. I was approached by the head of their operation, Betsy Connors, in the spring of 2024. When Betsy learned that I was in the middle of my Master Gardener (MG) training, she asked me to help with the WCCC nursery. I agreed, and after finishing the MG course in June, I started to come weekly to their oversight sessions with the nursery inmates.



Photo (left to right): Master Gardeners Janet Onopa and Jamie Toraason; Wai Lee, Arborist.

WCCC Agricultural Education Course

The Outdoor Circle has always tried to supply agricultural education for the women working in the nursery. Betsy asked that I work with an arborist who has been instrumental in helping WCCC with their nursery project, Wai Lee. Wai (rhymes with “Ray”) had taught a

class a year ago for the 'Hydro' inmates on basic horticultural knowledge—very similar to the Master Gardener curriculum, though simpler and shorter. He had partnered with an outside specialist to teach a series of sessions for them. Wai's specialist partner had moved to the mainland, so Betsy asked me to work with him to use the curriculum from the Master Gardener program to make a new "mini-MG course" for the WCCC 'Hydro' women currently working at the nursery. Many of the inmates that he had taught the prior year had been released from the WCCC, and the new group wanted the same training. Wai and I chose useful topics: basic plant biology, integrated pest management, native Hawaiian plants and invasive species, soils and plant nutrition, pruning, and plant propagation techniques.

Each session was two hours. We had a projector that displayed on an old sheet tacked to the nursery shed wall. We had no internet connection but could use our phones as hot spots for our computer to show some web sites. This would be strictly for the inmate's future use, as inmates are not allowed computer use or phones. Even handouts are not allowed in their living areas, but had to stay in the nursery office, where there is a small agricultural resource library. We made binders with our printed presentation slides for their reference. After each presentation, we went out to the nursery to apply what we had learned, such as looking for nutritional deficiency signs in plants, or finding pests and beneficial insects.

Betsy had funding for a part time nursery manager but had not found anyone for that position despite searching. When I suggested that I send a message out to the MG grapevine that a position was available, she happily agreed. Tina Lau sent out the message, and one of my 2024 MG classmates, Jamie Toraason, applied for the job and was hired by Betsy as "EXTREMELY qualified for the position!" Jamie started in September 2024 and immediately started to make great strides at much-needed organizing, prioritizing, supervising, and developing plans for the nursery with the inmates. The 'Hydro' crew is engaged and energized about planning new plantings and getting the workspace organized.

Wai and I will be expanding our educational sessions. The 'Hydro' crew has asked for chainsaw training (that is Wai's expertise!), irrigation sessions, and we are planning to add more on organic farming and companion plants, and separate sessions on vegetables and fruits.

Testimony

Our initial educational series was uniformly given positive reviews by the inmates-- "We just love having you come teach us this stuff!" said one, while everyone else was nodding. "I will use what you taught us here, but especially after I get out" said another, "it's all useful!" When I ask the women inmates what kind of work they want to pursue once free, they have all said they plan to work in agriculture or landscaping once released. One who was on the cusp of release talked about how caring for plants in the nursery "...gave me a new obsession, a healthy obsession. I used to only think and talk about drugs and selling drugs. Now instead I just think and talk about plants and farming, and it is so much better!"

Janet Onopa October 2024