

POSTED ON JULY 29, 2016 BY ROBESONIAN

Inmates offer garden-variety aid

Produced helping to feed homeless, hungry

By Jack Frederick



Darwin McDuffie and Gary Edge, inmates at the Robeson CRV, tend an inmate-run garden that donates produce to the Lumberton Christian Care Center. The garden program is one of several statewide efforts to rehabilitate offenders in North Carolina.

LUMBERTON — Darwin McDuffie has loved gardening since he began helping his grandmother with her plot as a child.

“I like coming out here,” said McDuffie as he stood among vegetable plants that will help feed the hungry in Robeson County. “It gives me an opportunity for free time to myself and to feed the homeless of Robeson County.”

McDuffie is an inmate at the Robeson County Confinement in Response to Violation Center, one of two facilities in North Carolina that houses inmates on 90-day violation of parole or probation sentences. He, along with several other inmates, are responsible for the planting, upkeep and harvesting of an inmate-run garden in a field behind the facility.

"The only thing that me and the officers do is disc the garden up, the offenders do it all," said Chief Parole Officer Travis Lewis. Lewis, along with parole Officers Merita Bailey and Brandon Bryant, is primarily in charge of overseeing the garden project.

Lewis said that the garden began in the fall of 2015 as a means to allow offenders a chance to give back to the community.

"You would be surprised at the reaction that you get," Lewis said. "The garden itself is a positive because they are giving back to the needy and the homeless people in town."

The inmates are currently harvesting the summer garden of watermelon, okra and sunflowers, which will all be donated to the Lumberton Christian Care Center to provide meals for the needy and homeless who come there to eat. In the next several weeks, they will plant their fall garden of collards, peas and beans.

"We feed about 75 to 100 people per meal, so each time they come it will be enough for two meals when they bring it," said Leroy Dixon, chef at the Lumberton Christian Care Center. "It cuts down on stuff that I won't have to order."

Dixon added that the center brings him produce two or three times a week, which can provide a meal a day for six days a week for up 100 people.

The garden is also growing pumpkins that will be donated to a local elementary school in the fall for a pumpkin carving contest. Lewis said the donation will bring immeasurable joy to the inmates.

"Most of the offenders here are actually away from there families now, so anything that is benefiting young kids, they are all about," said Lewis.

Groups of inmates are taken out to the plot at the back of the facility three or four times per week to harvest the crops, in between the five to seven hours they spend in classes each day.

"Some of them that go out there don't really know a lot about gardening, so it's fun for them to actually see it, and see the process and be excited about going home and doing some stuff, learning and growing on their own," Bailey said.

McDuffie, who will be released on Tuesday to return to his home in Chadbourn, is excited to once again start his own plot in the fall.

The garden is a part of a statewide program to rehabilitate probation violators by teaching them skills that will help them contribute positively to society and deter them from becoming a repeat offender.

“According to statistics, they have found that 40 percent of the prison populations were probation violators, parole violators and post-release violators,” said Lewis. “So they were trying to figure out a concept to get the offenders from out of prison and save the taxpayers money.”

Another inmate, Gary Edge, says that in addition to the good it has in the community, the garden has positive effects on the inmates as well.

“It’s good for us, too,” said Edge. “It helps us get our mind off of the everyday things. It’s a good stress reliever, too.”

Jack Frederick is an intern at The Robesonian.