

The Power of Gardening Horticulture Therapy At Log Cabin Boys Ranch

- Lisa Van Cleef, Special to SF Gate
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Most gardeners can wax eloquent over the healing effects of gardening. But out at the Log Cabin Boys Ranch, they're harnessing that therapeutic power in a rehabilitation program for at-risk youths.

Log Cabin Ranch is the San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department's detention center for boys 15 to 18 years old, nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The very urban youth incarcerated there are learning native plant propagation, habitat restoration and organic farming -- employable skills -- and at the same time contributing plants and produce to community projects back home.

The horticulture program was begun in the early '90s by the Juvenile Probation Department as one of the vocational training courses the kids are offered -- photography, culinary skills and carpentry are some of the others.

SLUG (the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners) was brought into the project in 1997 to expand the program and offer its unique therapeutic twist. According to SLUG's project manifesto, the organization believes in "the power of the garden to transform individuals and community."

In the program, the teens farm 4 acres of land and work in a fully operational, large-scale nursery. The food they produce is sold regularly at farmer's markets, and is used in SLUG's gourmet product line, Urban Herbals. The native plants are used by SLUG, San Francisco's Recreation and Park Department, and other landscapers to restore or landscape open spaces and community gardens.

These community projects, in turn, can be potential sources of employment for the teens upon their release -- a system SLUG calls "community revitalization in full circle."

Salgado and Farmer D

The program is run by Nicole Salgado and Daron Joffe (Farmer D as he's called by all), two people whose love for their work and passion for life is so infectious and inspiring you'll forget you're a crusty, cranky cynic.

Working with their part-time assistant Sammy Brown (Brown wasn't at work the day I visited the ranch, but Salgado mentioned his name so many times it was obvious she wanted him included -- that's the kind of nice people they are), they're introducing their charges to ecological theory, habitat restoration skills, soil ecology, landscaping and all aspects of organic farming, from composting to marketing. The horticultural program is very hands-on and designed to get the kids absorbed in the seasonal cycles of nursery and farm work.

The boys spend an average of seven months in the horticulture program, working in the nursery greenhouses and fields for half a day, three days a week. The rest of their week is spent in the high school at the ranch.

Salgado and Farmer D team-teach the program. Salgado handles the native plant propagation and restoration skills, and Farmer D teaches organic farming.

The Gospel of Plants

Salgado is a 22-year-old native of upstate New York with a degree in ecology and plant biology from Cornell. (Neither she nor Farmer D are much older than their students.) She has the gleam of the proselytizer in her eye when it comes to native plants and she clearly loves spreading the gospel of gardening and ecology.

Salgado spends most of her days in the greenhouse managing an operation that produces more than 120 species of native plants. When new students arrive, they're swept into the cycle of nursery production, where they're exposed to the basics of propagation, plant growth cycles, water conservation and the benefits of wildlife habitats.

In the nursery, November, December and January are the busiest months as the native plants are readied for the restoration projects. Early summer is the time for seed collecting and saving. Planting occurs year-round, depending on the species.

Through the nursery work, Salgado says she can see the boys develop their powers of observation, develop a sensitivity to life cycles, and acquire an awareness of seasons. All contain important analogies to their own lives, she says.

But Salgado says you won't hear ringing endorsements for the program from the kids. "They're in jail," she states flatly. "I kept waiting for them to tell me how fabulous this was, but then I remember. This isn't where they want to be."

And yet, Salgado says she's inspired everyday at the ranch watching the kids' growth as they're introduced to vital ecological concepts and the world of plants, both of which they hadn't known before.

Farmer D

At 25, Farmer D had already owned his own organic farm, restaurant and education center in Madison, Wis. Impressed by his operation, SLUG's former executive director, Mohammed Nuru, recruited D to start the organic farming program at Log Cabin as a complement to the native plant nursery.

The day I arrive, Farmer D is out in the fields wrestling with a noisy rototiller as he prepares one of the demonstration gardens for its spring planting. Farmer D likes using farming as an educational medium. He says nurturing a plant is significant for these kids.

"Watching a radish grow from seed can completely flip their attitudes. Gardening is a powerful teaching tool because food is so elemental and they get that," he says. "Out here, these kids grow food that they contribute to their communities back home. That's a life-changing experience for many of them."

Last year, Farmer D and his kids grew 200 pounds of collards, among other vegetables, that were donated to the Bay View Opera House Food Pantry. Fresh crops are donated to food banks regularly, and Farmer D and his kids produce vegetable seedlings for the SLUG community gardens in the San Francisco housing projects. They also produce a steady supply of produce for Urban Herbals.

This year, they're growing a full complement of vegetables as well as medicinal herbs and flowers at the ranch.

Every month there's something new to teach in farming. They'll learn about transplanting, irrigation system setup, plant spacing and sun/shade requirements for plants in May. In October, they'll learn seed-saving, and fruit tree planting and pruning. In December when there's little to do outside, Farmer D introduces nutrition, natural medicines and the concepts of organic farming.

A Graduate

19 year-old Octavio Sanchez, who graduated from the program last month, makes no bones about the fact that he didn't like it at first. But he says that the more time he spent in the garden, the more he grew to like it.

"I was a mess in the projects, but to be working the land, watching my plants -- especially the roses -- made things different." Sanchez says he was taken by the "sweetness" of the roses, and their symbolism -- "red for love, and white for someone who's down, like at a funeral."

And like any good organic gardener, Sanchez got into composting, "It was amazing to watch something dead bring so much life to the world."

Now, he's working full-time in the kitchen at Urban Herbals, SLUG's organic gourmet food program, preparing jams, salsa and honey for sale at farmer's markets and gourmet grocers throughout the Bay Area. At Urban Herbals, he's exposed to all aspects of manufacturing, marketing and distribution. Sanchez says he enjoys it and likes helping his community.

SLUG tries to absorb as many of their graduates as possible in paid positions within their habitat restoration department and within the Urban Herbals project. Salgado and Farmer D also work to place graduated students in paid positions with other gardening, landscape and restoration firms.

It's not easy placing the kids. Salgado says it takes a mental shift for people to accept the idea of hiring formerly incarcerated youth. But they keep plugging away at it, because as Salgado says, "Things are changing, people are slowly opening up."

Help the Heroes

Like most nonprofits of this sort, Salgado and Farmer D's program is running on a shoestring budget. They don't have enough gardening tools, they need more help in the nursery, and they need people buying plants.

The native plant nursery is a source of badly needed funds for the program. Although many of the natives are used by SLUG for their restoration projects, Salgado sells the rest. The California Native Plant Society buys plants from her for their fall sales. The San Francisco Recreation and Park Department buys her natives for their restoration projects, as do landscapers and contractors. The public is encouraged to buy from Log Cabin, too.

If you have any time or money to share, or if you're looking to buy native plants, contact Nicole Salgado at Log Cabin Ranch at (650) 747-9606 or nrsalgado@yahoo.com.