

Cultivating growth through horticulture: UI Extension partners with correctional facility

AT A GLANCE

UI Extension teams up with North Idaho Correctional Institution to provide horticulture classes that help residents to develop career and life skills to support their successful reentry into the community.

The Situation

North Idaho Correctional Institution (NICI) is a prison located near Cottonwood that houses up to 428 residents under retained jurisdiction sentences. While at NICI, residents have the opportunity to attend classes to develop life and career skills that will support their successful transition back into society.

NICI has several small gardening areas where residents can learn to grow vegetables and flowers. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, NICI had a vibrant horticulture program that included starting plants for area fundraisers and community gardens. Post pandemic, NICI did not have a horticulture teacher or the resources to continue the program.

Our Response

In the spring of 2025, University of Idaho Extension and NICI education began working together to develop a new program to offer horticulture classes to the residents of NICI. Together, they developed a collaborative eight-week course that included one day of in-person lectures from UI Extension personnel and hands-on lessons with planting and maintaining a small garden, and one day dedicated to individual research on a horticulture topic of the resident's choosing. UI Extension



The North Idaho Correctional Institution greenhouse at the beginning of the 2026 growing season.

developed horticulture lectures based upon previously offered Victory Garden and Idaho Master Gardener Program courses. NICI staff facilitated the research phase of the course and oversaw the completion and presentation of the final research projects.

Program Outcomes

Fourteen residents and two teachers' aides enrolled in the first round of NICI and UI Extension Horticulture classes. The second round of classes followed the same format and schedule as the first and included fourteen residents and one teacher's aide. The fifth round of classes concluded in the fall of 2026. Topic areas during the UI Extension lecture days included: botany basics, seed starting, soil fertility, garden planning, companion planting, pests and beneficial insects, weed

management and garden harvest. After the lecture, residents were given the opportunity to plant and maintain a small garden area. Residents took turns watering the garden morning and night, seven days a week, to ensure its productivity. The residents successfully produced beans, tomatoes, spinach, strawberries and various types of flowers. Once ripe, the fresh fruits and vegetables were harvested and taken to the chow hall to be used in meals.

The research project portion of the class allowed residents the flexibility to independently learn about an area of gardening or horticulture in which they were interested. Many of the residents chose topics which they plan to implement upon release. Residents had the freedom to get creative by presenting their projects: using audio/visuals to explain garden layouts, square-foot gardening, raising tomatoes in many different ways, mushroom growing business plans, wilderness survival, flowers and soil preparation. One resident created a model to explain hydroponics and an IOT sensor, while another choreographed and performed a Native American dance to demonstrate photosynthesis while his research partner narrated.

Fifty-five residents and seven teachers' aides have successfully completed the NICI and UI Extension Horticulture classes and were awarded certificates. 96% of residents indicated their horticulture and gardening knowledge increased directly through the class. 100% of residents indicated that they planned to implement the knowledge and skills learned through the class. A majority of residents indicated their intent to start a home garden or pursue employment in horticulture or a related field.

When asked about the most meaningful aspects of the program, residents mentioned hands-on activities, time in the greenhouse, presentations from UI Extension personnel, learning about growing patterns in different parts of Idaho, building new raised beds for future classes to use, independent research projects and companion planting.

They were also asked what could be improved for future classes, to which they requested more classes per week, more time in the garden and to extend the amount of lectures.

Through this class, residents also learned about their local UI Extension office and other programming and educational opportunities available to them upon release.

The Future

University of Idaho Extension and the North Idaho Correctional Institution plan to continue the partnership in 2027. We hope to increase the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables produced and used onsite for meals. Further collaboration to include animal science and forestry classes are in the planning phase. Additional UI Extension offices and personnel have expressed interest in implementing similar programs at Idaho Department of Correction facilities within their regions.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

- University of Idaho Extension
- North Idaho Correctional Institution

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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