

Farmer's Market and the Horticulture Technician Program within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice

Virtual Texas Master Gardener's Association Conference Keynote Presentation from May 19, 2021

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At this year's Virtual Texas Master Gardener's Association Conference, I had the pleasure of viewing a keynote presentation by Scooter Langley, who has been the Horticulture Instructor at Lee College for the past 13 years. Scooter is also a Texas Master Naturalist and currently serves as the Horticulture Director for the Friends of Lake Livingston, assisting with their conservation efforts.

The Huntsville Unit is a correctional facility that houses inmates from all walks of life whose paths led them to require rehabilitation within the state prison system. Huntsville is notoriously known for state executions of death row inmates. Scooter's presentation introduced us to a program there that deserves a bigger spotlight. Inside Huntsville's "Ellis Unit," the Lee College Huntsville Center's Horticulture Technician Program has been rehabilitating numerous inmates as well as preparing them for success in life outside the prison bars. The Ellis Unit has a garden with multiple raised beds, 3 greenhouses, and a shaded area. Every year, approximately 25 students participate in the year-long program, with the goal of earning certification as a Horticulture Technician during the first six months and as a Landscape Technician during the remaining six months of the year.

Students spend 6-7 hours a day, Monday-Friday, working out in the garden. They are given their own 6'x4' raised bed and they are taught gardening concepts, culinary skills, business classes and more. With assistance from the Walker County Master Gardeners, these students learn how to raise seasonal crops and gain experience through trial & error that is more valuable and meaningful than what they could learn from simply reading books or watching YouTube videos.

Accompanying Scooter during the presentation were three of his former students: Michael Rogers, who has since earned two associate degrees, a bachelor's degree in Business and is currently working on a 2nd Bachelor's Degree; Cody Wayne, who now owns a lawn care business; and Quincy "Q" Moore, who now owns a lawn care/outside service business. All three of these former students said their time working in the garden was *therapeutic*. Michael said it "kept his mind in the here & now." Cody said time in the garden was "a breath of fresh air" that is easily forgotten when you're behind bars. He appreciated the "sense of purpose" along with the anxiety and stress-relief it gave him. He stated it felt good to feel productive while he was out there working.

Q spent two years in closed custody, which means he was in an isolated cell and was only given one hour out of his 24-hour day to spend outside to move around. The garden program was initially a “culture shock” for him, since he was not used to interacting with others. The work in the garden later “allowed [him] to escape prison” during the day. Q came up with the idea and the name of his landscape business while he was in the program. When he was released, the skills he learned in the program helped him establish a foundation for his life and family.

These men are just a few of the many success stories that came out of the Horticulture Program inside the Ellis Unit. These men were all so grateful for the reprieve from prison life and for the inspiration that drove them to push for success in their lives upon release from prison.

The last portion of the presentation focused on Scooter’s participation in the Walker County Farmer’s Market. This venture is separate from his work in the Ellis Unit Garden. He and his family grow an assortment of vegetables and fruits with their #1 crop being, you guessed it, **tomatoes**. While he prefers the flavor of the heirloom varieties, Scooter has learned that people just want to buy good old red tomatoes. His favorite red tomato to grow is the Celebrity due to its resistance to viruses and disease.

Like the inmates in the Horticulture Program, Scooter and his family learn through trial & error. He also experiments by growing certain crops from seed inside the greenhouse (indirect seed) and comparing how those plants do against plants he started from seeds directly in the dirt (direct seed). His most recent experiment was with cucumbers. The plants he started as indirect seeds were producing heavily compared to the plants he started as direct seeds.

Scooter’s father-in-law and some hired hands help him work the land and tend to the crops. His mother-in-law helps with canning and making jellies. His wife sells the produce and other products at the farmer’s market. His two young sons help out with pest control by pulling unwanted worms & caterpillars off the crops as they try to keep the use of chemicals to a minimum.

Scooter is truly fortunate to have a great family “team” of support with his farming endeavors. His Horticulture Program through Lee College is truly inspirational and is a wonderful example of how beneficial gardening can be for anyone who wants to participate in this worthwhile activity.