In honor of Volunteer week we have chosen Deb Grams as a shining example of what it means to be a Wisconsin Master Gardener Volunteer. She is a long-time member of the Rock Prairie Master Gardener Association, and the driving force behind a garden program at the Rock County Community Gardens that provides one-on-one educational opportunities to inmates who are part of the RECAP program. We asked Deb to give us her reasons for working with that project. This is her response.

RECAP is a 5 month educational program for people incarcerated at the Rock County jail for crimes associated with addiction. The program provides parenting, math, English, computer skills, AODA, anger



management and restorative justice classes. Completing high school diploma requirements is an essential component of the program. A community service commitment of 85 hours is the recap way to fulfill their mission of teaching participants to "Give Back to Your Community". Members have completed these hours in a multitude of ways throughout the county. You may have seen them in their brown uniforms helping with the Rock County 4-H Fair, sandbagging to stop flooding, working at the corn festival, doing downtown clean up and many other opportunities.

The RECAP garden is approximately 1 1/2 acre in front of the Rock County Community Garden near the Sheriff's Office on Hwy 14, Janesville. Our little group, called the Community Garden Outreach Team, consists of several Master Gardeners, ex Master Gardeners and other volunteers that love the program. We bring the recappers out to the garden and teach them whatever we are working with throughout the season. This is a constantly rotating group, because they graduate a

group every month or so. We are reteaching garden basics with each new group. I enjoy listening to a recapper training a new recruit, you sure realize what they have learned and retained. It is a wonderful arrangement because so many of our volunteers are getting older and are not capable of the work anymore but they can advise and guide. Our recappers are mostly young, strong, full of energy and many are motivated by being outside in the fresh air, sunshine and physical work.

In "normal" times we offer a very limited CSA program that helps keep us sustainable. We can purchase seeds, sunscreen, hats, tools, gas, and numerous other necessary supplies. We also sponsor a fundraiser, our annual Farm to Table dinner. Of course, that didn't happen in 2020 and we are not planning for 2021. All the produce comes from our garden and the meat is locally sourced. A wonderful event! Hope you can all join us when the event returns. We received so many questions about what we were doing in the garden we decided to invite the community to come visit. Our annual Open House offers garden tours, snacks from the garden, a market "by donation", recipes and the Herb Society usually offers tips and information as well as some of their creative creations. This is one of my favorite parts of working with the recappers. They start the evening looking at their feet, playing shy and very nervous because they are expected to conduct the tours. By the end of the event they are standing taller, seem more confident and they have an awareness of all they have learned because they had to answer questions and share their knowledge. We sure hope the world is in a better place soon so we can offer up these events again.

All other produce is either fed to our workers or donated to local food pantries. This is a win-win situation, allowing the recappers to contribute to those food sources that their own families may be utilizing. We also share with various visitors to our garden, a wonderful opportunity to introduce something new to someone. I am so pleased to see ex-recappers stop by to say Hi and let us know they are doing well. We really like taking a tour with them and sending them along with some fresh veggies. I was recently told by two graduates that we "Changed their life because we cared". Wow, if that doesn't touch your heart!!

We have received a wide variety of responses to the garden, almost all positive. Many of these volunteers have never been exposed to a garden or nature; they are reluctant to be around bugs, worms, bees or soil. Others come to us with considerable knowledge, they grew up on a farm or helped granny in the garden every summer. We try to identify the strengths and skills of our helpers. There seems to be a cook, an artist and a mechanic in each group, who would think those are needed so often in the garden?? Some are excellent waterers, weeders and harvesters. We target our tasks to these skills to allow them to feel successful and competent. Of course, everyone is expected to do those everyday jobs as needed.

A major component of our education is to introduce new foods, think about where your food has come from and what has been done to it along the way. We encourage trying new vegetables, even offering alternative ways to prepare. I have heard the statement "I don't eat anything green" so many times I have

come to expect it. Most participants are good sports and will try most things, especially when we tell them it's ok to spit it out. They are very surprised to actual like them.

We consider our program a success if we can help make someone more aware about nature. We feel this adds to their general knowledge of the importance of gardens and food. They go home eating better and sharing plants and veggies with their family, have a new understanding of how to contribute to their community and have learned how teamwork can help us come together for a common goal. We expect each worker to fill out a time card that explains what they have done that shift and; the most important thing, "what did I learn today". If



they didn't learn something, they need to let us know and we teach them all something. A bug, a disease, garden techniques, etc.

We keep track of the poundage we donate. We average about 10,000 lbs each year, we even hit 15,000 pounds one year. I am happy that we donated over 9,000 lbs in 2020 even though we didn't have recap help until July.

I became a Master Gardener to learn more about plants. Along the way I discovered those beautiful, flavorful vegetables. I had a dream of "feeding the world" but we all know that is unrealistic. I decided we could feed our little corner of the world, a much more attainable goal. I feel blessed to participate in this program because I can educate along the way AND provide nutritious foods to people in need. It is rewarding to run into someone in public and hear, "I remember you, you taught me....."