RHODE ISLAND

A garden behind bars

A vegetable garden tended by inmates in women’s minimum-security unit at the Adult Correctional Institutions is providing short-term sources of nutrition and longer lasting life lessons. A4

Program provides new outlook

Garden Time teaches minimum security women inmates at ACI how to plant and grow vegetables

By JOHN HILL JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

CRANSTON — Patricia Lallier was in the garden Tuesday, cradling an armful of fresh-picked tomatoes that counselors at the Adult Correctional Institutions hope will be short-term sources of nutrition and longer lasting life lessons as well.

Lallier, an inmate in the women’s minimum security unit who works in the prison garden, was promoting the virtues of the chocolate cherry tomato. Later, she said she was fond of all the dozens of the garden which has been dug, filled and maintained since spring by the approximately 45 inmates in women’s minimum security.

“They’re better than people,” she said of the vegetables, herbs and flowers that have thrived in the inmates’ care. “They don’t talk back to you. They don’t judge you. And all you have to do is give of yourself, and a little time, a little nurturing.”

The garden, about 55 by 70 feet, has eight vegetable beds, aligned in pairs and enclosed by a strip of plantings. In the back, a pumpkin patch stretches along the width of the garden, with a pale yellow pumpkin the size of a tipped-over recliner chair resting in the sea of large, green leaves.

In the other beds, the yellows, oranges and reds of a variety of tomatoes peek out from within the leaves. Next it’s the deep purple and pale lavender of eggplants — “I think they look like dinosaur eggs,” Jeannine McConnell, another inmate, marveled — then yellow squashes and all manner of beans and herbs.

McConnell said on a regular day, she’s out at about 7 a.m. to water the vegetable garden, a flower labyrinth and another garden behind the minimum security unit. Doing it right takes about two hours, she said.