

# Calhoun County inmates farm their own food to supplement meals

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Under the heat of the early afternoon sun, several Calhoun County inmates inspected row after row of okra stalks Friday for suitable pickings.

On about a three-acre plot of land offered by the Calhoun County commission, inmates cultivated okra, squash, tomatoes, cucumbers, and a couple varieties of peas for use in the jail's kitchen.

On average, the jail must prepare around 1,500 meals each day, Calhoun County Sheriff Larry Amerson said on Friday.

"When they built the jail in 1986, they built the kitchen to serve about 400 meals a day," Amerson said.

At three meals a day, the jail used to serve roughly about 130 inmates; now it serves about 500. The garden, worked by the inmates and watched over by the jail administrator, Eric Starr, supplements the meals served with fresh produce.

Each year the county bids out the food contract to companies that provide food for institutions such as hospitals, schools and prisons. However, that contract provides little to no room for options.

"We are very limited and restricted with these contracts," Amerson said. "If there is a sale on some produce down at the market, we can't take advantage of that. The garden allows us to make up for those restrictions."

Further, the fresh vegetables add a different flavor to meals, cutting down on the number of complaints about the taste of the food, Amerson said.



## Cal. Co. Jail Garden

A Calhoun County inmate clips okra from a garden the jail owns and operates in the community on Friday, Sept. 18, 2015. This harvest yielded okra, squash, tomatoes, and several variety of peas. Kirsten Fiscus / The Anniston Star

“The food we serve is meant to provide each inmate with the necessary nutrition,” he said. “We do get complaints about the taste of it, but if they don’t like the food then they shouldn’t commit the crime.”

However, any opportunity is taken to spice up the meals with fresh vegetables.

“Most of the inmates love the okra and the peas,” Eric Starr said. “Sometimes they get tired of the squash and tomatoes.”

“We are hoping to get some more freezer space to save what we harvest for longer,” Amerson said. “Sometimes we can’t store all that we harvest, and the inmates get tired of eating squash three days in a row.”

The county jail received \$1.75 from the state for each inmate per day this year, Amerson said. The County Commission also allocated money from the general fund for the jail to help feed inmates, County Commissioner J.D. Hess said in a phone interview Friday. This year, the commission gave about \$1.60 for each inmate per day, according to Amerson. In total, \$3.20 is allocated for each inmate per day. Dividing that money for three meals, the county spends about \$1.06 on each inmate per meal each day.

Each meal, planned by a dietitian in a menu that rotates every two weeks, has some form of protein, starch, vegetable, fruit, and often some kind of dessert with dinner, according to a menu from the county jail.

With a second source of fresh vegetables, that money saved can be spent on other areas of the necessary food groups. In the past, the jail garden produced an average of between 4,000 and 6,000 pounds of vegetables a year.

“We just acquired this land so the yield hasn’t been as great, but we are hoping to cultivate it like the gardens in the past,” Starr said.

Tomatoes, squash, and okra were strategically planted to provide the most output for the money.

“They are pretty high-volume crops and best when you are trying to feed a lot of people,” Doug Trantham, a local farmer and volunteer, said by phone Friday.

The cost associated with tending to the garden is very little. Trantham, who is a second-generation farmer from Alexandria, plowed the field for the jail, and planted the seeds.

“I don’t get paid for it but they do reimburse me for any money I spend out of pocket on seeds or the gas used to plow the field.”

The land, given by the county, cost nothing to acquire. It’s in the Lenlock area in a location the sheriff asked not be specifically described for security reasons.

“This is a joint venture,” Hess said.

“This is the first plot of land that will be a real home for their garden. They will be able to stay and plant again and again, and we will loan it to them as long as they want it.”

Hess became a supporter of the project not only because of the savings on food cost, but also because it provides an opportunity for inmates to contribute to the community.

“This is a way for inmates to get out in the sunshine, get some exercise, and learn a trade,” Hess said.

“Gardening is becoming a lost art with the younger generation,” Starr said. “They enjoy getting out of the jail and enjoy learning the process.”

The inmates who provide the labor for the garden are carefully selected based on their offense, whether they have any prior offenses and their record of behavior while in jail, Amerson said.

“Most of the inmates who work the garden are here for theft and drug offenses,” he said. “We don’t put violent offenders out there to work.”