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Ilocos Sur's provincial jail blooms into an organic farming hub

By **FREDDIE G. LAZARO**

BANTAY, Ilocos Sur – The penitentiary of the provincial government of Ilocos Sur is abloom after inmates started growing an organic vegetable garden which has become a source of nutritious staple for sale and for consumption of the jail's "green thumbs."

The idea of turning the jail's 3,000 square meters of idle land into a vegetable garden came to fruition when provincial jail warden Raymund Tabios saw an inmate successfully grow vegetables near the window of his cell sometimes in March 2015.

It came barely eight months after the transfer of the provincial jail from the crowded area at the back of the provincial capitol to a 1.4-hectare idle lot in Barangay Taleb, Bantay town on July 1, 2014.

Tabios, inspired by the sprouting greens, proposed to Governor Ryan Luis V. Singson to create a vegetable garden inside the jail to make the inmates self-sufficient.

Governor Singson approved immediately the proposal considering that one of his priority programs are food security and agriculture.

Tabios then sought technical assistance from the provincial agriculture office.

The idle grassland was excavated with the help of the inmates from the 13 cells and one infirmary of the provincial jail. Afterward, the excavated areas were filled with 70 truckloads of garden soil enriched with chicken dung and carbonized rice hull.

When the 3,000 square meter-lot was ready for vegetable growing, the lot was divided into 13 plots - 10 plots assigned to male inmates staying in the 10 cells; 1 plot for the female inmates in the 3 cells; 1 plot for inmates in the infirmary; and 1 plot for the jail guards.

Each plot was planted with 12 species of vegetables and maintained by at least 30 inmates.

Among the prominent vegetable species grown in the plot are petchay, kangkong, eggplant, onion, ampalaya, string beans, kamote, okra, pepper, tomato, upo, cabbage, cauliflower, and squash.

The crops are grown organically as the inmates and jail guards use organic fertilizers and organic repellent against pests and insects.

"In this way, we are assured that the food we eat inside the jail are safe and healthy as the inmates themselves are the ones who grow the crops," Tabios said.

When the inmates and jail guards started to harvest their crops, it was more than enough for their daily consumption.

"Due to the abundance of the harvest of vegetables planted inside the jail's garden, we decided to sell them at the premises of the provincial capitol," Tabios said.

"And I'm amazed because we computed P166, 000 gross sales from our excess harvest within six months," Tabios added.

During the recent celebration of the 3rd year anniversary of the Ilocos Sur Provincial Jail, Governor Singson

lauded the jail management and the inmates in transforming the jail facility into an organic vegetable garden.

"We successfully developed the Ilocos Sur Provincial Jail into an agriculture training center and a learning institution for our Ilocosurian inmates," said Singson.

The inmates, including the jail guards, were trained on how to grow vegetables using organic farming technologies.

The inmates are also undergoing different regional trainings on agriculture inside the provincial jail to give them a chance to gain more information about the different agricultural technologies.

A 4H Club was also created to institutionalize the group of inmates in the provincial jail of Ilocos Sur.

Now, the provincial jail is conducting trainings on organic vegetable production wherein the inmates are the facilitators and lecturers.

"Our inmates are given many opportunities to undergo training to enhance their agriculture skills and knowledge particularly in organic farming; and most importantly, our Ilocos Sur Provincial Jail (ISPJ) is recognized by the Agriculture Training Institute (ATI) of the Department of Agriculture (DA) as the first provincial jail in Region 1 that became an organic farming training center," Tabios said.

"With this accolade to our provincial jail, we are proud because numerous visitors are coming to visit the area to learn about organic farming technology," Tabios concluded.

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