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Garden to the Outside World

by TaSin Sabir

In confinement surrounded by walls, spirits yearn for release, but there, within the cracks, hope blooms. In this, the act of nurturing a plant becomes an act of patience, an act of self-nurturing, a sacred space, and a step towards self-proclaimed freedom.

Recently, I was able to visit Alcatraz Island for the first time. Its stone walls, decapitated structures, and propaganda on its walls stating that "The incarcerated received delicious meals, the same meals as the guards," create a haunting atmosphere. Facts printed on poster boards are stuck to walls that once held actual people. While on the tour, Oliver Goodman, a National Park Service ranger stationed at Alcatraz, proudly shared how some of the beautiful flora was cultivated by the women of Chowchilla.

From the confines of the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) in Chowchilla, CA, emerges a partnership with Planting Justice and the Insight Garden Program, where women can learn how to grow, nurture, and harvest a variety of plants, including medicinal herbs, produce, and annuals. These gardening and landscaping skills offer a therapeutic escape from their cells and a chance to interact with nature, as well as providing skills and connections to stable jobs and community support upon their release.

For the women locked within CCWF's confinement, gardening becomes flight; it becomes healing. Amongst the rows of green, they find solace, their hands caressing the soil, their hearts unfurling like petals in the sun. In the quiet of the garden, they find their burdens lightened for a moment by the touch of the wind and the gentle sounds of birds. With each plant propagated, they cultivate connections that transcend bars and boundaries, offering a glimpse of the world beyond.

The National Park Service has joined this partnership with CCWF, and the seeds that are cultivated by the hands of the incarcerated are planted in the gardens of Alcatraz. Hundreds of plants, nurtured with care, find their way from CCWF to the gardens of Alcatraz Island. As they take root amidst the crumbling structure, they carry with them the stories of the women who tended them—stories of strength, of growth, and of beauty.

This concrete eyesore, aching to be once more a Native American land floating beautifully in the Pacific, now has a new outfit on—of floral print, adorned with roses of all colors, daisies, and succulents cascading down like a royal gown woven by the hands of the unseen. But we see you, Chowchilla, and you look damn good. Your garment represents resilience and hope and is a testament to the power of nature's embrace.