

# Inmates conduct ecological research on slow-growing mosses

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A Cedar Creek inmate and researcher in the Moss-in-Prisons project tends the garden. Credit: Nalini Nadkarni

Nalini Nadkarni of Evergreen State College currently advises a team of researchers who sport shaved heads, tattooed biceps and prison-issued garb rather than the lab coats and khakis typically worn by researchers. Why is Nadkarni's team composed of such apparently iconoclastic researchers? Because all of her researchers are inmates at Cedar Creek Corrections Center, a medium security prison in Littlerock, Washington.

With partial funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF), Nadkarni has guided her unlikely but productive team of researchers since 2004, as they conduct experiments to identify the best ways to cultivate slow-growing mosses. Nadkarni's so-called Moss-in-Prisons project is designed to help ecologists replace large quantities of

ecologically important mosses that are regularly illegally stripped from Pacific Northwest forests by horticulturalists.

Why did Nadkarni recruit inmates into her research team? "Because," she explains, "I need help from people who have long periods of time available to observe and measure the growing mosses; access to extensive space to lay out flats of plants; and fresh minds to put forward innovative solutions."

In addition to managing the Moss-in-Prisons research at Cedar Creek, Nadkarni helps the facility's inmates run various projects that promote sustainable living--including an organic garden that produces 15,000 pounds of fresh vegetables every summer, a bee-keeping operation and a composting operation that processes one ton of food per month.

One member of Nadkarni's research team, who was released from Cedar Creek, enrolled in a Ph.D. program in microbiology at the University of Nevada and presented his Cedar Creek research at the annual meeting of the Ecological Society of America in August 2008.

Nadkarni started the Moss-in-Prisons project with a type of NSF award that is specially designed to help scientists reach out to public audiences. More recently, she has received additional funding from the Washington State Department of Corrections.

In addition, Nadkarni has creatively stretched project resources by recruiting other NSF-funded researchers to contribute to a popular lecture series that she started at Cedar Creek. By giving such lectures, these scientists fulfill requirements for conducting public outreach that accompany NSF awards.

Source: National Science Foundation

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