Seeds of Success

Huntsville Center Horticulture Program Wins First Place in National Landscape Design Challenge

For the third year in a row, the Lee College Huntsville Center Horticulture program at the Ellis Prison Unit is a first-place winner in a national landscape design competition. Hosted by All-America Selections (AAS), this year's design challenge theme was "Games in the Garden."

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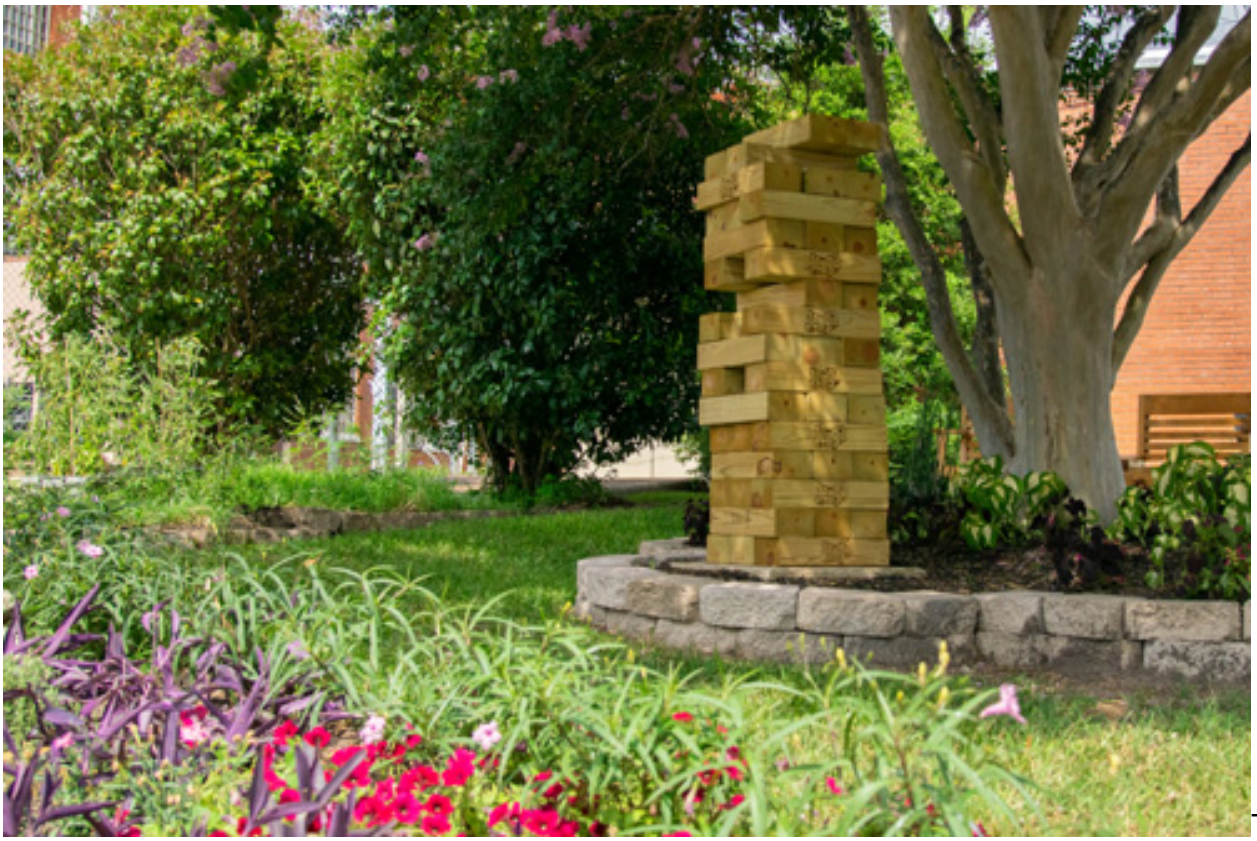
In the months leading up to the contest, Lee College students used high-quality current and past AAS winner seeds. They went through the process of propagation until the seeds turned into flowers and vegetables, then cared for the plants with adequate water, sunshine and nutrients.

Experts in horticulture and landscaping judged the gardens from the Lee College program and other groups by dividing them into three categories based on the number of visitors per year:

- Category I: Fewer than 10,000
- Category II: 10,001 – 100,000
- Category III: Over 100,000



The Lee College horticulture program took the top spot for Category I — beating out Weston Garden Center in Weston, MO; Mississippi State University-South in Poplarville,

MS and the Master Gardener Association of Tippecanoe County Display Garden in Lafayette, IN.

"We are always looking for something to challenge our students and this year, they took common games such as Jenga and Barrel of Monkeys and integrated them into the landscape," said James T. "Scooter" Langley Jr., Lee College lead horticulture instructor.

The student landscapes had two distinct groups of game themes: Classics and Contemporary.

The Classics group included:

- The Barrel of Monkeys with wooden monkeys hanging from a beautiful crepe myrtle, and the space was accented with Big Duck Gold marigolds and Orange Flamma celosia.
- A "Hole in One" golf game that contained ramps and putting greens surrounded with Queeny Lime Orange zinnias and Purple Asian Garden celosia.
- A battleship landscape that utilized the favored Queeny Lime Orange zinnias around the "battleships" created from reclaimed gas cylinders and sheet metal.

The Contemporary group included:

- A corn-hole landscape with playing boards that were bordered by South Pacific Orange cannas and more Queeny Lime Orange zinnias and Onyx Red ornamental peppers.
- An interactive Jenga set which was over five foot tall and was a big hit with all visitors.

Contestants were also encouraged to generate publicity and hold events to share the story of All-America Selections and AAS Winners. You can watch the Lee College students and Langley tell their story in this YouTube video. The woodworking students also participated in the contest by creating sculptural elements to complement the serene gardens.

"I was looking for something outside of a prison atmosphere that the guys could interact with," Langley added. "This project has really changed the way the students think, who they are and how they deal with certain conflicts and challenges."

While it's rewarding to win first place, and for a third year in a row, this landscape challenge has a much deeper meaning for the students, who are incarcerated.

"Being a part of something that wasn't prison-related made me feel a connection to the outside world," said Earl Madison contest participant and former student. "It made me feel like I wasn't detached, which is a huge burden many people here carry behind bars."

Student Roderick Smith admits he had no intention of ever learning about plants before he enrolled in the horticulture class. His idea of horticulture was digging a hole in the ground, dropping a seed in the soil and covering it up. But Smith soon developed an appreciation for landscaping such as germination; the kind of nutrients plants need to survive in different conditions; and that bees actually have an important role in pollinating plants.

"I didn't know anything about planting or the plants themselves, but as I went, I learned. As I asked questions, I learned. The process of creating a landscape is like creating your kids," explained Smith, who oversaw the Barrel of Monkeys display. "These flowers are like my kids. Whatever you put into them, you get out of them. If you put your work into them, you will get some pretty flowers."

Ray Ogles, a teacher's aide, says being a part of a project like this awakens everyone's responsibility with nature.

"We all have something to contribute to the creative landscape of design," Ogles said. "I believe it helps us have better comradery in this process, and the accomplishment of a job well done feels awesome."

A complete collection of photos of all contest entrants can be found on the All-America Selections website.