How a garden grows

By Wendy Smith

David Lockwood had never heard of Maria Compere before she called to ask for help with an orchard. His quick Internet search revealed that 96-year-old Compere is the founder of Knoxville Green Association, which is responsible for numerous beautification projects, including the planting of 1.7 million daffodil bulbs along Pellissippi Parkway.

Lockwood, like many others before him, caught Compere’s vision and agreed to design an orchard for the Knox County Detention Facility in East Knox County. He recently received an award from Knoxville Green for his efforts there. “He’s the sweetest guy,” says Compere.

A pilot program allows a crew of six to eight female inmates from the county jail to work at the garden three days a week. Before it was established three years ago, the only work programs available to women were in the jail’s kitchen and laundry room. The garden has flourished under the care of the enthusiastic crew. “They want to be outside, out in the sun,” says Knox County Sheriff’s Office Cpl. Peggy Branson, who supervises the program.

Knoxville Green had already donated a greenhouse, seeds and plants for the garden. But Compere wanted to add an orchard, and Lockwood was perfectly suited for the task. As a UT extension fruit and nut crop specialist, he works with growers from across the state and was able to procure nearly 100 peach and apple trees for the project from a grower in McMinnville.

He also worked well with the prisoners. He taught the inmates without talking down to them, says Branson.

An inmate from the Knox County Jail stabs tomato plants at a garden at the Knox County Detention Facility. A pilot program allows female inmates to work three days a week. “It’s hard to say how it is, they’d rather be outside than in,” says Knox County Sheriff’s Department Cpl. Peggy Branson.

The respect was mutual. “It was a delight to work with them because they were very interested in how to do it,” says Lockwood.

Working in the garden is a new experience for inmates who have spent their lives in housing projects, says Branson. Some don’t even know what a goose is when they first see one on the farm. But they come to love caring for them, as well as the donkeys and chickens. They also love watching the seeds sprout in the greenhouse and are amazed at how quickly the plants yield a harvest.

The orchard, which was planted in April, will take a little longer to produce. Lockwood says the peach trees could bear fruit in three years, and the apple trees in four. The trees are already flourishing, and Branson doesn’t mind the wait. The orchard will be a source of pride to those who planted it long after they have served their time, she says.

Federal regulations prohibit the inmates from eating the produce from the garden. Instead, it’s used to feed KCSO staff and donated to neighbors. Lockwood hopes that the women who work there will reap other rewards, like an interest that leads to growing a few vegetables at home or even a career in horticulture after they are released.

The program has been so successful that representatives from other prisons in Tennessee have contacted him for more information. Branson, who loves her job, says anyone can do it. “If you’ve got a little patch of land, then you can have a garden.”