



GLEANNING

Capturing Surplus to Meet Local Needs

Walk into most any emergency food pantry in the United States and you'll likely witness the same inventory: towers of canned, boxed, highly processed foods loaded with fats, sugars, and preservatives. Fresh produce is rarely featured, and when it does appear, it's often the wilted remains of grocery store surplus. What's wrong with this picture?

Fresh Food and Health

Highly processed foods may last a long time sitting on a pantry shelf, but too often they fail to provide substantive nutrition. Emergency food sites accept the donations because they're easy to store. Producers are happy to offload surplus commodity food.

But do we want the rejections from our industrialized food economy ending up as the salvation for hungry individuals most in need of a healthful meal? No wonder heart disease is the leading cause of death in America.¹ Obesity rates at over 30 percent and diabetes rates at nearly 8 percent testify to dependence on harmful food. Given our culture of quick, cheap meals, too many of us are eating products that are bad for us—and low-income people are often the most affected.²

However, healthful food is being produced in abundance across the country. In Vermont, we joke that the only time you need to lock your car is in the height of summer, when neighbors try to pile their gargantuan zucchinis in your passenger seat. Farmers always plant more than they expect to sell, anticipating possible prob-

lems with pests, disease, or poor growing conditions. Anyone who has been to a farmers market at day's end, when everyone is packing up to head home, may have wondered what will become of all the beautiful, fresh, unsold produce. At many farms, this nutritious bounty is simply thrown onto the compost pile. Meanwhile, thousands of pounds of crops that are never even harvested are left in the field and are eventually tilled back into the soil.

Researchers estimated in 1997 that around 27 percent of the food grown nationwide is wasted before it even reaches people's plates.³ Today that estimate approaches 50 percent.⁴ Wasted food now accounts for more than any other waste product in the country's landfills. As a nation, we are growing in volume faster than is necessary for our survival.⁵

Small Fix, Big Impact

Addressing poverty, hunger, and our industrialized food system may seem a daunting task, but if we break down the challenge into simple solutions, it quickly becomes clear that a bit of creativity and cooperation can help us provide nutritious food for all.

Gleaning is one such solution. Gleaning addresses problems of food waste, hunger, poverty, and carbon footprint through one simple activity. Defined as the act of harvesting surplus produce, gleaning has been practiced at least since biblical times. In fact, a chapter of Leviticus instructs farmers to leave the edges of their fields unpicked

so that the poor might reap the benefits of the harvest. People may also recall the story of Ruth, who survived lean times and supported her family by gleaning crops.

Over recent decades, groups and individuals across the country have begun to resurrect that ancient tradition in order to provide meals for those in need. Powerful in its simplicity, it demonstrates that not all problems require expensive technological fixes: some can be addressed simply through ingenuity and regard for neighbors.

Gleaning groups have sprouted up nationwide, each with unique programs and approaches. In Vermont, where agriculture is a significant economic engine, gleaning is seen as one obvious solution to hunger and malnourishment. It first became organized in the state about a decade ago, when Theresa Snow started a non-profit called Salvation Farms.

While working at an organic vegetable farm in her Lamoille County hometown, Snow noticed how much edible food was being composted or left in the field. She asked her employer if she could salvage the food for those who could not afford to buy it. Soon she was enlisting other farms, and before long she had built a grassroots food-justice program that continues to thrive. She also worked to institute the Vermont Foodbank's statewide gleaning program, and she personally inspired me to organize a gleaning crew in Addison County.

Addison County is ripe for an ef-

fort like gleaning. As many as 11 percent of the residents survive under the federal poverty line, and hundreds of families make a trip to the food shelf every month for emergency rations.⁶ Before gleaning came along, HOPE (Helping Overcome Poverty's Effects), an antipoverty organization that houses the county's largest food shelf, was receiving only nonperishable items from traditional commodity surpluses and produce that had exceeded its shelf life in grocery stores.

Soon after a connection was made to HOPE and farmer interest in making donations was established, the gleaning program grew almost effortlessly. HOPE was thrilled to start receiving fresh, locally produced, nourishing food, and farmers were happy that their extra crops were feeding hungry families.

In the first three months of the Addison County Gleaning Program, we harvested 8,478 pounds of food from local farms with the help of many enthusiastic volunteers. Our second year brought in nearly 20,000 pounds of food, with more than 30 farms participating. As of this writing, we are on track to break records in our third year and are focused on trying to freeze and can what can't be distributed immediately so that it will be available all winter.

Many Wins

The act of gleaning benefits every person involved. Food shelves and their clients benefit from free, nutritious food, and the planet benefits from the elimination of the hundreds of thousands of transportation miles that moving commodity goods entails. Vol-

unteers have the opportunity to visit local farms and share in the bounty. In ripple effects, many volunteers subsequently leverage their purchasing power at the grocery store to support farms that they have visited because of gleaning. Farmers get publicity, tax breaks for their donated produce, and the knowledge that the food they worked so hard to grow is addressing hunger in their community. In sum, gleaning creates a thriving local-food economy that ensures accessibility of food for everyone. Gleaning stands in opposition to the misconception that the local foods movement is an elitist phenomenon.

For me, personally, one of the most important aspects of gleaning lies in the stories it creates. In 2009, the first year of gleaning in Addison County, the food shelf eliminated boxed mashed potatoes in favor of real, local potatoes in Thanksgiving baskets. On Thanksgiving itself, Addison County families were able to express gratitude for delicious food grown by local farmers. In 2010, a woman selecting from the food shelf stopped to say that the spinach we had gleaned was her only source of the iron she needed during her pregnancy.

Gleaners from all over the country, whether they work in rural or urban areas, have similar stories of individuals touched by the program. Gleaning has become not only a logical solution to many of the pressing concerns of society, but a celebration of community, labor, and local resources.

Addressing the social, environmental, and economic problems perpetrated by the current food system will require a massive restructuring, with change initiated at the level of the farm, the federal government,

and everywhere in between. Why not start in our own backyards? Food has brought friends, families, and neighbors together throughout history, and sharing local, healthful food with those who need it provides an opportunity to fight inequality and become more rooted in our communities.

Gleaning programs are proof that solutions can be found through community engagement. The act of gleaning may serve as a prayer of gratitude for the generosity and resilience of our local food economies.

Corinne Almquist pursued environmental and religion studies at Middlebury College. Upon graduating, she received a 2009 Compton Mentor Fellowship to promote gleaning across Vermont. She continues to coordinate the Addison County program and support gleaning initiatives statewide.

Endnotes

¹ Kenneth D. Kochanek et al., "Deaths: Preliminary Data for 2009," *National Vital Statistics Report* 59, no. 4 (March 2011).

² See "Overweight and Obesity" (Washington, DC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010); and "Diabetes Statistics" (Alexandria, Virginia: American Diabetes Association, January 2011): <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/trends.html>.

³ Linda Scott Kantor et al., "Estimating and Addressing America's Food Losses," *FoodReview* (January 1997): 3.

⁴ "The Environmental Food Crisis: A Crisis of Waste," *Environment News Service* (February 17, 2009), <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/feb2009/2009-02-17-01.asp>.

⁵ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Basic Information about Food Waste," <http://www.epa.gov/osw/conservematerials/organics/food/fd-basic.htm>.

⁶ See U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts 2009 for Addison County, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/50/50001.html>.

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A Food Bank That Provides Produce

by Stacy Wong, Greater Boston Food Bank

There are a variety of ways to provide fresh produce through food banks. The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB), for example, distributed about 6 million pounds of produce in 2011 (out of 36.7 million pounds of food overall). Some was purchased from Massachusetts farmers, using money from the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program.

In what might be considered a form of "gleaning," GBFB also rescues fresh produce at the end of trade shows so that the food doesn't go to waste. Also, larger farming operations that are too big for the handpicking method of gleaning (or don't want the liability of having strangers on their land) may offer the produce at low cost. The food bank pays the farm's nominal cost to harvest, pack, and ship it. We call that "low bono" (derived from the term "pro bono") because the produce is offered at a deep discount. In fact, the cost comes to about 13 cents per pound.