

The Gleaning of America **by Caroline Abels**

It's an ancient practice—so old it's mandated by the Bible—but these days, finding someone who knows what “gleaning” is all about is like hunting for a peapod in a field of green.

Which is exactly what it is about: gleaning refers to the gathering of unmarketable vegetables, fruits or grains left behind in farm fields after harvest. The food is deemed too small, too pockmarked, or too bruised to meet the cosmetic standards of supermarket shoppers, but it is welcomed by the poor, homeless, and unemployed victims of the current U.S economic slump, who receive gleaned food from assistance organizations after it is collected by volunteers.

In Biblical times, gleaning was required, hence Leviticus 23:22: “When ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest; thou shalt leave them for the poor, and for the stranger.”

Today's gleaning beneficiaries needn't wander the fields, though, thanks to the efforts of organizations like the Oregon Food Bank, the San Antonio Food Bank in Texas, and Santa Cruz Second Harvest Food Bank in California. The Hunger Action Network of New York State has published a gleaning guide for students.

It's even likely that gleaning has arrived in your community; grassroots groups around the nation have geared up this harvest season to help their neighbors. The Virginia-based Society of St. Andrew, which oversees a national volunteer gleaning network that is active in 16 states, reports that over 12 million pounds of produce was gleaned nationwide by 37,700 volunteers in 2008.

The way it works is that gleaning groups put together teams of volunteers—sometimes the food recipients themselves, sometimes school groups or church groups—who head to local farms and collect leftover produce. Gleaners also rescue unwanted food from supermarkets, wholesale outlets, farmers' markets, even people's backyard fruit trees. Gleaned crops are dropped off at central locations, such as food pantries and soup kitchens, where the fresh produce is highly appreciated by those in need—the poor, jobless, and the disabled and senior citizens on limited incomes.

I recently spent a satisfying morning gleaning with the Vermont Foodbank, which provides food to assistance agencies statewide. When I pulled into Dog River Farm—a small vegetable farm near my Montpelier home—about a dozen volunteers were standing beside the Foodbank's red pick-up getting a quick course in gleaning from field coordinator, Amanda Payne: farm workers had already harvested the best beets, she told us; we were to sort through the remaining ones lying on the ground in the field.

The beets we harvested that day—only an inch or so around, their stems mushy from recent rain—looked perfectly edible. Barbara Ploof, a 66-year-old volunteer, expressed what all of us gleaners were likely thinking: “It just seems like such a shame to let all this food go to waste. It's food that's needed.” The farmer who runs Dog River Farm was grateful, too: he would later receive a tax credit for his donation.

A few days later, I tagged along with Amanda as she delivered boxes of fresh gleaned vegetables to Vermont food assistance groups. The soup kitchen organizers, food pantry directors, and senior center cooks clearly appreciated receiving free, fresh vegetables; their budgets are so limited that they can often only afford cheaper, less tasteful canned goods. They also reported that many seniors who receive gleaned food grew up on farms, and therefore appreciate receiving farm-fresh food.

What's distributed in Vermont is no small potatoes (pardon the pun): in 2008, about 400 Vermont Foodbank volunteers collected 160,000 pounds of gleaned food, and dropped off to 180 sites, including nursing homes, school lunch programs, and senior centers.

But even small-scale gleaning projects can make a difference. Kentucky resident John Walker recently founded the Lexington Urban Gleaning Network, which encourages city volunteers to knock on the doors of neighbors who have fruit trees or vegetable gardens and ask to glean what isn't wanted. Last year, Walker and a few others collected nearly 400 pounds of apples and pears from city backyards for the hungry.

With U.S. unemployment and underemployment now totaling 16.8 percent of the labor force—one out of six American workers—it makes sense to conserve food through gleaning. It's also an opportunity for seniors, students, and citizens from all walks of life to get outdoors, get some exercise, and help those in need.

And what a great way to get to meet your neighbors. It turns out that gleaning is not only a sensible way to feed the hungry but a delightful way to harvest community.

To volunteer with an existing gleaning group, or to learn how to establish your own, contact the Society of St. Andrew: 800-333-4597 or www.endhunger.org.

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