

Salvaging Food For Those In Need

by Maureen McGarry

There is a famous painting by Jean Francois Millet in 1857 - "The Gleaners"- that tells an important human story. It depicts three peasant women gathering whatever grain they can find that is left behind in a harvested field of wheat. It was a controversial painting because of its realistic depiction of rural poverty, which upset the upper class of French society in the mid-19th century.



The act of gleaning (or harvesting leftovers) is a centuries-old practice. It is also a current practice in Humboldt and Del Norte in response to local issues of hunger and food insecurity.

As Anne Holcomb, executive director of Food for People noted, "Fresh fruits and vegetables are often considered an expensive luxury by the individuals and households we serve, and yet they are so essential for maintaining good health. Accessing the bounty from people's backyard gardens, fruit trees and farm fields makes it possible for us to provide top quality produce for those in need while eliminating potential waste".

In backyards and pastures up and down the North Coast, there are fruit trees and farms abundant with food that often goes to waste during this time of year. Food for People aims to capture this source of food for distribution to those in need.

“Right now, it’s mostly apples and pears,” says Laura Hughes, Local Food Resources Coordinator at Food for People. “We also have farm gleaning opportunities. For low-income residents in Humboldt County, fresh produce is a vital part of any healthy diet, but too often is left out when money is tight.”

Volunteers are needed to help with this process. Food for People’s Gleaning Program has an email list of volunteers who can respond “on demand” if a source for gleaning presents itself.

“I send off an email to a list of volunteers. If volunteers are available, they respond. If they’re not available, they don’t,” says Hughes.

“Mostly, people that call us with available food have picked what they want and can’t keep up,” adds Hughes. “Some are not physically able to pick what they have and don’t want to see it go to waste, or have a mess of rotten fruit on the ground.”

Food for People supplies ladders, fruit pickers, picking bags and boxes. Volunteers need to be able to do physical work including lifting boxes of produce and loading them into vehicles.

Regarding spoilage, Hughes says that apples keep for a while, but other more perishable fruit gets moved through quickly. “We have a fluid way of distributing produce that gets the food to people who need it.” Volunteers are also needed in the warehouse at the food bank on 14th Street in Eureka.

“Traditionally, this is the busiest time of year. It’s been an earlier than usual season. Gleaning goes on all year long, but the busy season usually starts in June and goes all the way through October or November.” Other ways to help include registering your tree(s) in the tree-gleaning database, planting an extra row of food in your garden, volunteering, or harvesting your own extra food and donating it to Food for People.

In Del Norte County, the Del Norte Gleaning Project led by Kelley Nolan has encouraged the “plant a row” method as well. Volunteers can offer food from their gardens that they have harvested, or volunteers will come to resident’s gardens and harvest the produce. They will also be offering workshops in Food Preservation, Canning, Drying, and a component of Nutritional Literacy. RSVP has volunteers in both counties who support these programs.

If you have food to harvest and donate, or want to help as a gleaner, contact Kelley Nolan at 464-7072 for the Del Norte Gleaning Project. In Humboldt, contact Laura Hughes at lhughes@foodforpeople.org or call 445-3166, ext 312.

Maureen McGarry is the Project Director for RSVP/VCOR at the Area 1 Agency on Aging.