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# After the Harvest

## Gleaning to Fight Hunger, Reduce Food Waste

BY JILL HENDERSON

From the very first days of our fledgling country, farmers have been the backbone of American economics and culture, providing humans and animals alike with nutritious, whole food. This has been the mission of family farmers for centuries, and they rightfully take pride in the hard and sometimes thankless work they do. But despite their best efforts, waste has always been a part of farming.

The latest estimates show that a whopping 96 billion pounds of food goes to waste each year. Fifty-two percent of that is fresh produce, and while some excess produce is fed to livestock, much of it is left to rot in fields, orchards and gardens, simply because it is missed by harvesting machinery or it may be slightly imperfect and not acceptable for market.

### FACING FOOD INSECURITY

It is also shocking for most Americans to learn that one in six of us faces hunger every day. A majority of food-insecure people are neither homeless nor unemployed. Many are working families with children, senior citizens and disabled people living on fixed incomes. They may be underpaid or dealing with an illness or overwhelming financial burdens, or can't drive or don't own a vehicle.

Many of America's hungry don't have access to farmers' markets or a grocery store where they can buy fresh produce, even if they could afford it. In Kansas City, Missouri, nearly 365,000 people are food insecure, and nearly 50 percent of them are children and senior citizens. Of those who receive food as a part of charity, 59 percent are white, 24 percent are African-American, 9 percent are Hispanic and the rest are from other racial and ethnic groups.

Food-insecure people may have food today, but most don't know where tomorrow's will come from. Without access to fresh fruits and vegetables with which to make healthy meals, many wind up eating cheap, processed, pre-packaged foods that increase their risk for obesity and diseases such as depression, heart attack, cancer and diabetes.

Living on a farm or homestead naturally brimming with food can easily blind us to the extent of hunger in America. At times it seems like a problem too big to fix. Thankfully, though, for the estimated 41 million people who struggle with hunger each year, and particularly for those who do not have access to fresh produce or simply can't afford it, nonprofit gleaning organizations like After the Harvest go the extra mile to feed the hungry and reduce food waste.

### HELPING HANDS

Located near bustling downtown Kansas City, Missouri, After the Harvest (ATH) is run by a small group of dedicated employees who spend their days organizing volunteers, lining up growers, coordinating with charitable organizations, gleaning fields and orchards, delivering produce and raising funds in order to get healthy, nutritious produce to hungry people in the Greater Kansas City area.

Lisa Ousley, ATH's executive director, describes how the organization got its start. "Previously, I worked for the Society of St. Andrew (SoSA – endhunger.org) to open their West office in 2008, rescuing more than 15 million pounds of fresh produce to feed hungry people over six years."



### Why is There Waste?

With all the talk of wasted food, it is important to understand that the produce left behind after harvesting isn't an intentional act. Crops that are picked by hand are often graded for size, quality and salability on the spot. Produce that does not meet the buyer's strict specifications of size, shape, color and blemishes will be rejected, so it is simply left in the field to rot or be tilled under.

Waste is also common in farm operations that require the use of large harvesting machinery. A percentage of quality edible produce is inevitably left behind. For farmers working large acreages, running machinery through the fields multiple times to pick up leftovers is not always economically feasible.

Sometimes a crop is harvested and loaded onto trucks only to be rejected by the buyer down the road. At this point in the process the farmer has little recourse. Sometimes the load is used as animal feed, but according to the USDA, more food reaches landfills and incinerators than any other single material in the municipal solid waste system.

Unfortunately, scenarios like these occur every year on American farms. Because most farmers work on a tight profit margin, each operation – from huge farms and ranches to very small market growers – must determine what action is least time-consuming and most economically viable. The good news is that After the Harvest and other gleaning organizations are willing and able to recover a good portion of the food that has been left behind.



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Ousley and members of the SoSA West Advisory Board came to believe that a locally based hunger relief operation would work better in the area. "A subset of the old SoSA West board formed a Board of Directors for After the Harvest, and we opened our doors in May of 2014. Today, our produce goes to agencies serving low income food-insecure families, children and seniors, primarily in the Greater Kansas City area."

After the Harvest serves 372 individual agencies and is the largest donor of fresh produce to Harvesters Community Food Network (HCFN – harvesters.org), a large regional food bank operating in 26 counties in Northwestern Missouri and Northeastern Kansas. HCFN serves 620 not-for-profit agencies, including emergency food pantries, community kitchens, homeless shelters, children's homes and others. Harvesters is a member of Feeding America (feedingamerica.org), a nationwide network of more than 200 food banks.

Thanks to good organizational skills and small armies of hard-working volunteers, ATH gleaned 1,391,711 pounds of produce in 2014 and steadily increased to a whopping 5,068,533 pounds in 2017. Altogether, ATH has provided more than 12.2 million pounds of fresh, quality produce to feed hungry people in its corner of Kansas and Missouri.

Ousley said that more than 90 local farmers donated over 270,000 pounds of produce to ATH in 2017. Klaus and Lee Karbaumer are among those who regularly work with the organization.

"With After the Harvest as our partners, there's no disheartening food waste. The food isn't left in the fields, and our coolers aren't running to store an overabundance of vegetables until they have spoiled. Fruits and vegetables are reaching families who rarely have the opportunity to experience fresh, local produce."

#### IN THE FIELD

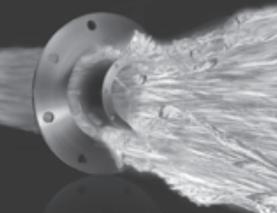
Volunteers glean after the harvest, picking what's left in farmers' fields and gathering already-harvested leftover produce.

"The majority of the funds we raise help secure semi-truckloads of donat-

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## Fun for a Cause

One way After the Harvest raises money is through its popular Greens & Jeans County Fair Fundraiser, which will be held this year on September 15 at Cider Hill Family Orchard in Kansas City. This fun, festival-like fundraiser will take place in a beautiful rustic barn, surrounded by a local apple orchard where the organization often gleans.

It features gourmet and down-home fare, a spirited auction and a more grown-up twist on the county fair midway, all while raising much-needed funds to keep the trucks rolling.



ed produce that might otherwise end up in landfills,” said Ousley. “Through our truckload and gleaning program, in 2017 we provided 63 varieties of produce – from apples, arugula and asparagus, to turnips, watermelon and zucchini. We glean home gardens and large farms and everything in between. Growers large and small call us when they have extra produce. For our truckload program, we usually work with very large commercial farms via Farmers Choice [a for-profit organization that serves wholesale, foodservice and hospitality companies while creating opportunities for hunger-relief nonprofits throughout the United States], who connects us with farmers and their produce that might otherwise be wasted.”

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ATH strongly encourages food producers of all sizes to consider working with them to help feed the hungry. They glean fields and orchards and will pick up graded-out, excess, or unsold produce at farmers' markets and farm stands. They also secure truckloads of donated produce and work directly with farmers who plant extra just for them.

"If you grow it, we'll glean it," said Ousley. "We'll bring the number of volunteers needed to rescue the amount of donated produce, usually within a three-hour period. ... We can glean or pick up as often as necessary – once a day, once a week or once a season. From 50 pounds to 500,000 pounds ... whatever you can donate we can use to feed hungry people."

A trained field supervisor orients volunteers to the farm: where to walk, what to pick and special instructions and safety guidelines. While ATH would like as much notice as possible, it understands the unpredictable nature of crop harvesting.

Ousley said they ask for at least a two-day notice to allow time to find volunteers.

"On an annual basis, we provide each produce donor with a detailed donation report for tax purposes. If you have concerns [about liability issues], please refer to the Good Samaritan Act, protecting those who donate good food in good faith. Also, before gleaning, all volunteers sign a waiver releasing landowners of liability."

## VEG SQUAD TO THE RESCUE

As a nonprofit, volunteers are the backbone of ATH's gleaning operations. Without them, a vast majority of the produce donated would never leave the field. A special group of gleaners is called the VEG (Vegetable Emergency Glean) Squad.

"This is our quick response team that comes together on short notice for weekday morning produce gleanings," said Ousley. "They share rides, friendship, fresh morning air and exercise as they rescue nutritious produce."

Mary Dees, a VEG Squad gleaner, recounts her gleaning experience: "I have gleaned tomatoes, radishes, mustard greens, red lettuce and, my favorite, giant turnips. On one gleaning, I met the 87-year-old farmer, harvested his lettuce, drove it to a food pantry and watched a man take a large handful of the freshly picked lettuce for his sandwich. Now that was a great gleaning!"

Bernadette Graves, another volunteer gleaner, says, "It's an opportunity to be outdoors, to learn more about growing food, to meet some new folks and to provide fresh produce for others. It can also be a great workout when we're gleaning melons or squash."

But VEG Squad gleaner Nancy McDonald sums up the experience of volunteering best: "After the Harvest is a perfect example of 'the more we give, the more we receive.' Being in the company of like-minded people in nature, surrounded by healthy vegetables and knowing that they are going to a very good cause, is uplifting and fulfilling. Try it once, and you'll fall in love."

In addition to all the work that goes into rescuing food from the field and getting it where it needs to go, I asked Ousley what the organization's most pressing needs are.



“Food, funds and friends!” she said. “We need more farmers to have us out to glean more excess produce, whether picking or just picking up. We need funds to sustain our operation, and friends, advocates and volunteers to help us glean.”

Money is always at the top of the list with any nonprofit, and After the Harvest is no exception. To “rescue” each semi-truck load of roughly 42,000 pounds of produce, ATH pays \$5,000 in packaging, handling and

sourcing. Ousley points out that ATH is efficient with the money it raises, with 88 cents of every dollar going directly to feed hungry people. One hundred dollars provides 3,300 servings and over 800 pounds of fruit and vegetables, which is a much more efficient use of funds than an individual could ever accomplish on their own.

Jill Henderson is an artist, author and organic gardener. She is editor of Show Me Oz (*showmeoz.wordpress.com*), a blog featuring articles on gardening, seed saving, nature ecology, wild edible and medicinal plants and culinary herbs. She has written three books: *The Healing Power of Kitchen Herbs*, *A Journey of Seasons: A Year in the Ozarks High Country* and *The Garden Seed Saving Guide*.

**NEED MORE INFORMATION?**

To learn more about After the Harvest, visit [aftertheharvestkc.org](http://aftertheharvestkc.org). To schedule a gleaning or donate unwanted produce, email After the Harvest at [info@aftertheharvestkc.org](mailto:info@aftertheharvestkc.org) or call 816-921-1903.

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