

Gleaning A Harvest For The Needy By Fighting Waste

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Heard on Morning Edition

January 20, 2011 STEVE INSKEEP, host:

A national anti-hunger organization is reviving an ancient practice to feed the poor: gleaning. Old Testament scriptures kept farmers from picking their fields and vineyards clean, with instructions to leave the edges for orphans, widows and travelers. As Blake Farmer of member station WPLN reports, modern-day gleaning is more about preventing waste.

BLAKE FARMER: Food gets left in the field for all kinds of reasons. Mechanical harvesting misses a lot. Sometimes, the crops aren't pretty enough for supermarket shelves.

Ms. LINDA TOZER (Society of St. Andrew): The statistics are that 96 billion pounds of food - this is pre-consumer food - goes to waste in this country.

FARMER: And the U.S. Department of Agriculture's totals are going up, not down. Linda Tozer works for the Society of St. Andrew, which recently added an office in Tennessee. The organization coordinates farmers around the Southeast and out West.

Ms. TOZER: What we are trying to do is build a network that will take food that would not make it to market for a variety of reasons, and get it to agencies that are feeding the hungry.

NATHANIEL SMART: Where should I put this?

Ms. TOZER: I think you're going to put it right over here.

NATHANIEL: I already weighed it.

Unidentified Man: That's great.

NATHANIEL: Want to see?

Unidentified Man: You could - OK.

NATHANIEL: See?

FARMER: At Jackson Farms in Pikeville, Tennessee, Nathaniel Smart heaves a mesh bag of red and green bell peppers from a scale, and drops it on a growing pile. This 5-year-old and his dad are key to what makes gleaning work: free labor.

NATHANIEL: Let me find a big, ripe one. And to pick it, I just pull it.

FARMER: There's nothing wrong with these peppers, but they're not worth the farmer's time. Johnny Jackson has more than he knows what to do with in a chocked-full storehouse.

Mr. JOHNNY JACKSON (Farmer): You got supply and demand - is the first rule of the deal. And if you've got more supply than you have got demand for it, it's going to go to waste.

FARMER: Jackson has nothing to lose. The motivation, he says, has little to do with a biblical command, though he's happy to feed the hungry. He'll also pocket a tax deduction worth the value of what he gives away.

But Jackson says it's hard to plan for gleaning. He has just a few days between when he's decided he's sold all he can, and when the produce goes bad. On short notice, the Society of St. Andrew gathered a preacher, a Girl Scout troop and a few neighbors, like Mary Beth Sanders.

Ms. MARY BETH SANDERS: I just got an email, some farmer friends passing around word of this activity.

FARMER: Sanders' frayed, straw hat gives her away as a part-time farmer. Even she is surprised by how much goes to waste.

Ms. SANDERS: I mean, you pass farms up here all the time that - just peppers rotting on the ground or on the vine. And it's not cool.

NATHANIEL: That one's actually my daddy's.

FARMER: The scales have measured more than a thousand pounds of produce. Volunteers pack the rescued rations in a church van and a pickup truck, bound for a food pantry and the sheriff's office.

Linda Tozer says her gleaners could spend all weekend here picking several thousand pounds more, but she has her own logistics problem. No one else is lined up to take the vegetables.

Ms. TOZER: Isn't that horrible? But we have done this much, and that's more than if we hadn't shown up. So that's the way we've got to look at it.

FARMER: Tozer's organization gleaned more produce than ever last year 18 million pounds. That's still small potatoes compared to how much will never make it to the dinner table.

For NPR News, I'm Blake Farmer in Nashville. ♦

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