

The Ancient Practice of Gleaning is Still Relevant



Salvaging what remains on fields after market season tackles both food waste and food insecurity.

When market season is over for farms in large parts of the United States, the land is often still filled with food. An overabundance of fresh and nutritious produce gets left to rot across America's farmland each winter, despite the planet's rising temperatures and high rates of un- and-underfed communities.

“How does one even begin to make a difference? By putting one foot in front of the other,” assured Mimi Edelman of I & Me Farm in Orient Point, New York. Gleaning is an ancient practice that targets both food insecurity and food waste, and can play a big role in remedying our current system.

One chilly morning I joined Mimi and two other women on one of our local farms on the North Fork of New York. We began our small gleaning effort in December 2018, gathering surplus produce from farms in our area to bring to a local food pantry. The East End of Long Island is home to many small farms that supply both local and New York City-based restaurants and food purveyors. Because of the region's location, farming is seasonal and generally ends by January.



“When gleaning for the hungry, one is mindful that each cut of the knife is a bite, a plate, a meal.”

The air was brisk and smelled clean after a day's heavy rain. Mimi stretched her arms wide, visualizing the lost bounty. Through Mimi's work with farmer Tim Warner and the Terry family

farm, we were given permission to harvest for donation to local nonprofit [CAST: Community Action Southold Town, Inc.](#) Broccoli, turnips, Brussel sprouts, and beets were a few of the cool season crops on our list. In the field we also found hardy kale and cauliflower, “crops kissed by frosts but still enlivened with essential nutrition.” Mimi, bent down to show their stems. “When gleaning for the hungry, one is mindful that each cut of the knife is a bite, a plate, a meal.”

Gleaning dates all the way back to the Old Testament, when farmers and large landowners were legally required to save a portion of their harvest for gleaners. “*When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.... Leave them for the poor and the foreigner.*” (*Leviticus 19:9-10*). Today, gleaning mainly refers to volunteers harvesting what remains in the fields in order to donate to food banks and pantries.



“The Gleaners,” an oil painting by French artist Jean-Francois Millet, 1857.

[Gleaning organizations](#) today recover food from farms, restaurants, grocery stores, wholesale markets, and backyards. Among the some of the largest organizations dedicated to gleaning is the [Society of St. Andrew](#) (SoSA) that has been in operation since 1983. Last year, with the help of more than thirty thousand volunteers, SoSA gleaned and distributed more than 16 million pounds of fresh produce.

In addition to addressing hunger, gleaning is a direct way to deal with food waste. An [estimated](#) twenty billion pounds of produce is left in the fields every year in the United States. The effect this has on our climate is extensive—food that’s left unharvest represents wasted land, water, and energy—just to name a few of the resources that go into growing food. “A lot of food rots in fields,” [says](#) John Mandyck, chief sustainability officer of United Technologies, an engineering and refrigerated transport company.



About 40 percent of the food we grow is never eaten—and the resources used to produce it goes to waste, too.
Infographic source: NRDC

Each of us wastes an average of 400 pounds of food every year, according to the National Resource Defense Council. Meanwhile, upwards of [ten percent](#) of U.S. households were “uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet the needs of all their members” in 2018. How can it be that in a country where [up to forty percent](#) of food produced here goes uneaten, more than 50 million people in the United States are food insecure?

LET’S LOOK AT THE SUPPLY CHAIN



Each American wastes 400 pounds of food on average every year, according to the National Resource Defense Council.

Production: It's costly for farmers to bring product to market, and low market prices mean high risk for each crop. Because yield is subject to threat by weather, pest and disease outbreaks, and market conditions, growers often overplant to safeguard their harvest. Also, cosmetic standards are getting harder and harder to meet, which means less-than-perfect produce is getting left behind.

On the field, Mimi showed us how to check broccoli and cauliflower for nutritional value. By running a finger across the surface and to feel for density, we made sure everything we donated was still filled with all the right stuff.

Note: Check out [Imperfect Produce](#), [Hungry Harvest](#), or [Misfits Market](#) if you want to help reduce food waste by signing up for imperfect looking produce that's perfectly nutritious.

Processing: The largest source of loss during processing is trimming. Often more is removed from food products than what's necessary. Overproduction, packaging and product damage, and printing errors are also areas for loss during this stage. Perfectly edible food is often thrown away because of brand restrictions.

By bringing our produce to a food bank which distributes directly to consumer hands, we sidestepped a big stage in the supply chain where extreme waste occurs. CAST also offers recipes for foods available in their pantry that include ideas for using the whole vegetable in order to discard as little as possible.

Distribution: Transport and handling often lead to major losses. Food expires in storage, and mishaps during transportation or on loading docks also plummet the shelf life of these products.

Gleaning projects like ours can make a big difference when it comes to transportation of fresh goods. We used our personal vehicles, and because we pulled from local farms and delivered to a local agency, the distance traveled was short and without risk.

Grocery Retail & Foodservice: In this stage, a lot of waste is attributed to spoilage, package damage, and markdowns. Full-service and quick-serve restaurants in the U.S. waste food pre- and post-consumer, meaning both in the kitchen and after food has been served.

The unpredictable nature of the industry is also a large cause of loss, as sales fluctuate greatly and make planning difficult. Portion size has spiked over the last few decades, so much so that the food on your plate typically runs [two to eight times](#) the size of USDA and FDA standard serving sizes, which leaves a lot of—yes—waste.

Homes: ReFED's [2016 report](#) estimated that approximately \$450 worth of food is thrown away in the average American household—*per person*. Because food thrown away at home and in restaurants has already been transported, stored, and usually cooked, this stage of waste results in a larger resource footprint than any other in the food supply chain.

Food Donation & Redistribution: The largest barrier at this point of the supply chain is transportation. It's both an added cost and an added task for nonprofits focused on food recovery, particularly for perishables like prepared foods, meat, and dairy—all of which require refrigerated transport.

One of the most fruitful aspects of gleaning locally was cutting the food supply chain short. By eliminating transportation costs and duties, we directly connected resources and got food to the right place quickly.



Fresh produce delivered directly to a local food pantry's doors.

CAST's crew was overjoyed when we arrived with fresh veggies. With cool enough temperatures, we were able to bag them in their parking lot and save limited indoor space. Clients came to us directly to receive the produce. Once the agency closed for the evening, I arranged what was left in their pantry's fridge for the following morning's pickups. Gleaning projects provide another facet to food donation and redistribution that should be the rule, not the exception: the dignity of nutritious, first quality, fresh food that those who can would choose for purchase. Healthful nourishment is an essential and basic right.

Cathy Demeroto, Executive Director of CAST, explained: "We serve about 200 households per week, and they're very appreciative of having fresh local produce that they otherwise would not be able to access." How can we make farm-to-table eating available to every member in our communities? *One foot in front of the other.*

Below are some resources to help you get started.

[CAST](#), Community Action Southold Town, Inc. Not only do they include a food pantry, but they also support education, advocacy, and outreach where we live. Look out for small nonprofits that address food recovery in your area!

[CompostNow](#) makes at-home and at-work composting easy. They'll do all the heavy lifting for you. All you have to do is watch what you waste.

[Spoiler Alert](#) helps food manufacturers, wholesale distributors, and grocery retailers manage their food waste in more effective ways.

[Food Forward](#) connects nonprofits focused on food rescue to volunteers eager to glean!

[Feeding America](#) is an expansive network of member food banks all across the country. Through this resource, you can find your nearest place to donate.

[The Food Recovery Network](#) is a student movement fighting food waste and hunger in America. They have chapters in 44 states and Washing D.C. Click to see how you can get involved.