

Gleaning, not just for the birds



David Briggs

FARMS: Volunteers collect oversized but tasty leafy greens last Monday.

It happens every time: a farmer plants a crop, the crop matures, the choicest produce is harvested, and the rest—the blemished or oversized or not-quite-rights—are tilled under to decompose and start the process anew. It's not waste, per se, just overabundance.

Seven years ago, however, a few Marin Organic staff members who were visiting Peter Martinelli's organic farm in Bolinas saw a field of misfit zucchini about to go under and sensed a possibility.

"A lot of it was just too scabbed to be marketable to sell at his farmers' markets so we just asked Peter if we could come out and bring volunteers to glean some of the food before it rotted and became soil again," said Scott Davidson, Marin Organic's School Lunch and Gleaning program manager. "And he said, 'Yeah, of

course, that would be fine.'"

They harvested what they could, and donated it to Stockstill House, an assisted living facility in Point Reyes Station. "It was just a few boxes, not a ton," Davidson said. "But it was a ton for the Stockstill House. They had zucchini bread for weeks."

Gleaning has been around on for centuries. In nineteenth century England, for instance, gleaning, or the act of collecting leftover crops from fields, was a legal right for villagers. Often times a ringing church bell would notify gleaners when they could begin and end their work. In some parts of France it is still protected by law, although the laws vary in different provinces, and with different crops.

And so, building upon the success of that first zucchini harvest, Marin Organic decided to follow suit. It contacted

local farms, and set up a weekly gleaning schedule. Volunteers began trickling in, and many schools and nonprofits in the area started expressing interest in receiving and using the collected food.

Today, the program is thriving. During the height of the gleaning season, which typically lasts from June through Thanksgiving, as much as 1,000 pounds of food is collected weekly from partnering farms and distributed to summer camps, senior centers and schools throughout the county. What isn't used is donated to food pantries and community centers in need. During the school year, the produce helps sustain more than half of Marin County's school lunch programs.

Davidson estimates that anywhere between 20 to 25 percent of foods that are grown locally never leave the field. "It's the romaine heart that wasn't quite dense enough at its center," he said. "Or the zucchini that got a little too big."

"At the same time, there are people right down the street that are having a really difficult time accessing great food," he added. "So our work is really recognizing where those needs are and where the extra resources are and inviting everyone to join us in helping to connect those dots."

On a balmy afternoon in early August, Davidson stood before a long row of mixed greens at Star Route Farms, in Bolinas. A small crowd of volunteers watched intently as he plunged his hand into the soil, twisted it and pulled up a large head of freckled romaine. He peeled off the outer layers and held it up against the sun. "This," he said, "this is exactly what we're looking for."

The group spent the following two hours harvesting as much as they could. What was amassed was then transferred to a refrigerated truck and delivered the following morning to local summer camps, including Clem Miller, Walker Creek Ranch, and various YMCA-sponsored camps.

"We serve ingredients, we don't serve meals," Davidson said. "It's a very inclusive, non-contractual kind of program. We work on a human to human level with each food service director, adapting to wherever they're at and helping to serve them at whatever capacity they are ready."

Financially, that can make a big difference. Gleaned lettuces that are donated to a school, for example, can then free up the resources to be used towards purchasing more local and organic foods.

"The donations are great, but the real motivator is to offset as much food costs as possible for schools," said Adrienne Bauman, Marin Organic's executive di-

rector. "Because in turn that allows them to support more of our local producers."

And Davidson said that whatever schools either can't or choose not to use will eventually find a home: "If it's too much of a liability for a school, then it certainly isn't a liability for the local food bank."

Doug Gallagher, who manages Star Route Farms, said the gleaning program makes a lot of sense. "It's great because this lettuce got a little too big for us for our market and I gotta turn the ground around and replant them," he said. "So this is a really good outlet for us—a win-win."

Davidson agreed. "It's a pretty easy idea," he said. "And it's really satisfying, on all levels. A lot of times people want to come and visit a local farm but they don't really know how. The glean team has created the opportunity to come out and visit for free. And the farmers are happy to give responsible people access to their food so that someone can actually eat the food that they put so much care into growing."

On average, anywhere between 10 and 40 people show up to volunteer their time each week.

Angelo Duvois, a retired history teacher from San Rafael, has been coming out for three years. "I have a nice routine: I go down to Stinson to go to the beach for a while and then come out here to help," he said. "I love the harvesting, especially when there's kids out here. And, of course, it's great because we always get a few items to take home ourselves."

Last year, in an effort to raise awareness, Davidson and his organization sponsored the first annual National Gleaning Day. School children and community members showed up by the dozens at some 14 local farms fully prepared to scrounge. This year, the event will be held on September 12.

"There are people all around the country that glean from gardens and local farms and from the back of grocery stores to give to church soup kitchens and school lunch programs," Davidson said. "And most of them are really just small, grassroots initiatives in little communities trying to make a difference. So we wanted to create a day to really recognize that."

"But that's just one day on the calendar," he added. "Come the next week we'll be right back here doing it all again." — *Jeremy Blackman*

For more information on Marin Organic's Gleaning Program, or to find out about participating, contact Scott Davidson at scott@marinorganic.org, or call (415) 663.9667.

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