

# The Produce Isn't Pretty, but It's Edible



Stuart Isett for The New York Times

Benjamin Rasmus and Karen Ullmann searching for broccoli heads in Carnation, Wash.



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By ESHA CHHABRA

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SEATTLE — BENJAMIN RASMUS cycled 850 miles over 10 days around Washington State last year to promote gleaning, or gathering edible produce left behind in fields after harvest.

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Harvested broccoli and red butterhead lettuce.

“It was for work, can you believe it?” he said, laughing as he drove down Highway 202. “I had eight bike stops — all in communities that have gleaning projects.”

Besides being an avid cyclist, Mr. Rasmus is a program director for Rotary First Harvest, a nonprofit group based in Seattle that connects farmers, truckers, volunteers and [food banks](#) for hunger relief. Lately, he has been occupied with a special project called Harvest Against Hunger, focused on gleaning.

According to the Agriculture Department, 25 percent to 33 percent of the food grown on American farms is wasted. Some is lost from mechanical harvesting, which routinely misses a head of lettuce or an ear of corn here and there. And some produce is simply not pretty enough for supermarkets — “cosmetically damaged,” as Mr. Rasmus put it.

Started in 2009, Harvest Against Hunger is among the more recent of the projects addressing the problem through gleaning. Such efforts are distinct from city-focused campaigns that gather unwanted food from restaurants and other businesses.

In 1988, the Society of St. Andrew, a faith-based nonprofit group, created the Gleaning Network, a hunger relief program deriving inspiration from biblical references to gleaning

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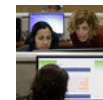
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as a means to feed the poor. The society says that more than 17 gleaning events take place across the country daily through its network and that it rescued more than 23 million pounds of produce in 2012.

In August, Daniella Uslan, a food-recovery advocate at the University of North Carolina, went cross-country to look at gleaning projects in farm regions. Perhaps not surprisingly, she avoids the term food waste. “All food is worthy,” she said in a recent phone interview. “It’s not waste.”

During the 10-day trip, arranged through the Millennial Trains Project, a nonprofit that crowdfunds travel to explore projects with social impact, she observed more than two dozen gleaning projects. “Food reclamation is definitely a growing trend and the next sustainable-food-system frontier,” she said emphatically.

Most gleaning models, she notes, are charity-based, but a Colorado company, MM Local, is turning gleaning into an entrepreneurial endeavor. [MM Local](#) acquires cosmetically damaged and surplus produce to make pickles and preserves. “It requires creativity and a stockpile of recipes because our business basically depends on what’s available at the time,” said Ben Mustin, a co-founder and co-chief executive.

In Washington, not-so-perfect lettuce was on Mr. Rasmus’s agenda during a visit to Oxbow Farm in Snoqualmie Valley, 30 miles east of Seattle, for an afternoon of gleaning with others pitching in. Harvest Against Hunger says it has gleaned more than two million pounds of produce since its inception four years ago and enlisted the participation of more than 8,000 volunteers.

The two people with Mr. Rasmus, Karen Ullmann and Jody Miesel, were from AmeriCorps Vista, formed in 1993 from the joining of Vista — or Volunteers in Service to America, created by President John F. Kennedy — and AmeriCorps, the community service organization.

There are currently 10 such workers in 14 communities around Washington, each getting a monthly stipend of about \$1,000 during their one-year stints — circumstances not lost on Ms. Ullmann, 23, from Ramsey, N.J.

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“Funny thing is, we are practically on food stamps,” she joked. “But it’s a great learning experience.”

That afternoon, Mr. Rasmus, Ms. Ullmann, Ms. Miesel and local volunteers collected nearly 500 pounds of butter lettuce. Later that week, they returned for broccoli heads.

The farm managers, Adam McCurdy and Luke Woodward, favor community projects and support a program that delivers fresh produce to homes. They also sell at farmers’ markets in Seattle and run an educational center on the farm to teach children about agriculture.

“They’re ideal partners,” says Ms. Miesel, 34, from Stafford Springs, Conn., as she gleaned her way through a long row of unwanted lettuce. Pointing at the large leafy heads, she said, “Just imagine: Normally, all this would just be tilled in.”

Ms. Miesel would later take the truckload of lettuce to a food bank in Carnation, a rural community of fewer than 2,000 residents by the Cascade foothills, and the next day for distribution in Kirkland, a Seattle suburb.

Such gleaning projects are an effective model for small-scale farmers, says David Bobanick, executive director of Rotary First Harvest, because volunteers provide labor the farmers otherwise could not afford, and First Harvest builds the transportation system to get the produce from farm to food bank. “None of it requires the farmer to give more of his time,” he said. And farmers can qualify for a charitable tax deduction.

Food banks, pantries and emergency meal programs are subject to state and local regulation and say they are vigilant about the safe handling of the food they distribute. The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996, limits the liability of those involved in gleaning.

Mr. Bobanick said that with federal food stamps — the growing Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program — under fire in Congress, it is more realistic to pursue more self-reliant programs like gleaning to address food insecurity.

Later that week, at a Rotary breakfast meeting overlooking Lake Union (Rotary First Harvest has its roots in Seattle’s Rotary community), Mr. Bobanick made sure to announce

a reminder: "Rotary First Harvest apple-packing party on Saturday morning. 8 a.m. Be there!"

That morning, Mr. Bobanick and an army of volunteers packed 60,000 pounds of apples for local food banks.

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