

The Need To Feed Hungry Families Cultivates New Interest In Gleaning

Corinne Almquist wants to restore the biblical tradition of harvesting what farmers leave behind

By Gregory M. Lamb
CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
CORNWALL, Vt. — Clusters of plump, wine-red Empire apples hang from sagging boughs, yearning to be picked. A small group of volunteers is obliging, quickly filling a truck bed with wooden boxes of fruit.

They're led by a smiling, energetic young woman, her red hair pulled back and practical rubber boots on her feet, ready for tromping in an orchard on a

day that threatens rain.

Later that afternoon Corinne Almquist will deliver some 20 bushels of apples, about 1,000 lbs., to a food shelf for free distribution to hungry local residents. Sunrise Orchards in Cornwall, Vt., where Almquist and her helpers have been gleaning, can't sell the apples: Most have cosmetic blemishes caused by being pelted in a late summer hailstorm. Though grocery chains won't buy them, they're still tasty and nutritious.

Gleaning — harvesting leftover crops for the poor — is an idea as old as the Bible. In the story of Ruth she gleans in the fields of Boaz and the two fall in love. Leviticus urges farmers to leave

the corners of their fields unharvested, providing food for the poor and strangers. The practice was common in 19th-century France, too, celebrated in Jean-Francois Millet's 1867 painting "The Gleaners," which shows women picking through a harvested wheat field.

But gleaning is also finding modern advocates in the United States as the recession eats a hole in many family budgets.

"This idea of rescuing food that's going to go to waste makes an awful lot of sense to people," says Teresa Snow, program director of agricultural resources at the Vermont Foodbank in South Barre. Gleaning, she says, is growing in popularity "not only across Vermont but across the nation" as hard times are "forcing people to be creative."

"There's so much food available in fields. It's astounding how much is wasted," says Almquist, who graduated from nearby Middlebury College in June with a degree in environmental studies. A 2004 report from the University of Arizona in Tucson estimates that 40 to 50 percent of all the food that could be harvested from fields will never be eaten.

Funded by a year-long fellowship from the Compton Foundation Inc. in Redwood City, Calif., Almquist wants to spread the good word about gleaning throughout northwestern Vermont.

Working with local farmers, and with help from loyal volunteers, in recent weeks she's delivered about 6,000 lbs. of squash, carrots, potatoes, and apples to food shelves or senior centers. Earlier in the summer she gathered cabbage, kale, radishes, and herbs.

"Gleaning isn't really happening on a widespread basis across the United States, and most people haven't even heard of it," Almquist says. "I've found some really wonderful volunteers who are excited about doing this every week and working it into their routine."

Almquist's quest to introduce gleaning is "quite inspiring," says Snow, who is acting as her mentor for the fellowship. "She has

tremendous energy and drive and sees her potential to make an impact."

Gleaning often means harvesting what a farmer can't sell, such as produce that has a bruise or mark on it. Sometimes the vegetable may be the wrong size (too large or small) or the wrong shape. Other times, farmers simply overplant and don't have time to harvest it all.

"It's been incredible how open farmers are to the idea of gleaning and how generous they've been," she says. "Farmers don't like to see food go to waste when they've worked so hard to grow it."

Another form of gleaning involves hauling away leftover produce from a farmers' market at the end of the day. "It's such a simple concept — the food is already harvested," she says. Farmers don't want to have to pack up produce and haul it back to their farms to compost it.

What kinds of crops can be gleaned?

"Probably any crop you can think of I've gleaned," Almquist says. Her hardest task has been picking beans, she says with a laugh. "It's so labor-intensive to pick green beans. You can spend three hours and get 10 lbs. of green beans. It doesn't always feel worthwhile."

There can be other challenges too. On some farms, she says, "The weeds were so out of control that it was more like a scavenger hunt to try to find vegetables in the ground."

Her favorite glean has been raspberries.

"People are so excited to get fresh fruit, especially berries," she says. "Those are so rare for people who eat from the food shelf." They can eat the fruit immediately, while "they may not know what to do with a bunch of kale."

After she stops gleaning for the winter, Almquist plans to teach cooking and nutrition classes, helping food-shelf visitors learn how to blend fresh foods into their diets. One idea: Place easy recipe cards in front of the produce. "This is what you can do with turnips," for example.

Ideally, people who take free food from a food shelf would help with gleaning. But "that's really a time issue," she says. "Many of the people using the food shelf are working multiple jobs and are already struggling to find time to cook and feed their families. They don't necessarily have time to come out and help pick."

Food shelves also need to shift their thinking to accommodate gleaned food. Many aren't prepared to store perishable commodities.

"Some food shelves are still reluctant to take fresh food.

They're not sure what to do with it or whether their clients will want it," she says. "Part of the challenge with gleaning is finding food shelves with cold-storage facilities and space to refrigerate things."

Another challenge is to time gleaning to the schedule of the food pantries, which may be open only once a week or less.

Besides introducing fresh food into the diets of those who rely on food shelves, gleaning also leaves a smaller carbon footprint. The produce travels perhaps 10 or 15 miles "instead of thousands of miles — and arriving really tired and stale," she says.

Almquist grew up in New Jersey ("the Garden State," she points out) an hour outside New York City. She worked on an organic farm in Vermont for a semester as a high school junior, which instilled a love of growing things.

But she had made a special connection with one plant long before then, as a preschooler.

"I befriended this giant bush in my backyard," she says with a smile. "I would talk with it for hours at a time, telling it my 4-year-old woes. And the bush would talk back."

Celebrates First



Riley Grayce Broadwater celebrated her first birthday on November 16, 2009. She is the daughter of Shawn and Cassie Broadwater of Hustontown.

Riley's grandparents are Sam and Amanda Broadwater, Waterfall, and Link and Jane Arnold, Waterfall. Proud great-grandparents are Rand and Dorothy Pas, Waterfall; Paul and Anna Cutchall, Hustontown; and Helen Peiffer, Harrisonville.

Riley celebrated her special day with a "Lil Ladybug" party.

No Recusal By PA Judge In Child Starvation Appeal

WASHINGTON, Pa. (AP) — A western Pennsylvania judge has declined a defense request to step aside rather than hear a death row inmate's appeal in the starvation death of her 7-year-old daughter a decade ago.

Defense attorneys had asked Washington County Judge Paul Pozonsky to recuse himself before a Dec. 14 hearing for 40-year-old Michelle Tharp. She was convicted of killing Tausha Lee Lanham, who weighed less than 12 pounds at the time of her death in 1998.

Attorneys cited, among other things, the judge having played a sad country western song about an abused child moments before he imposed the death penalty.

Authorities say the child's body was dumped in West Virginia by Tharp and her boyfriend, who is serving a 15- to 30-year sentence, and they later reported the child abducted at an Ohio shopping mall.

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Fulton County Medical Center's State of the Company Meeting



at the New FCMC located at
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Monday, November 23, 2009
7:00 PM · Main Lobby

Agenda to include the following:

- Board Governance
- Combined Audited Financials & Statistics
- FCMC/FCMCF Annual report
- Election and nomination of (2) community members to serve on the nominating committee from the floor

For More Information please contact the
Community Relations & Development Department
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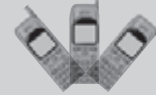
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