

Merrymeeting Gleaners

APRIL NEWSLETTER



Jean-Francois Millet's famous 1857 painting "The Gleaners" pictured next to some modern day gleaners. Much has changed in the practice of gleaning over the generations, but you don't need to look too hard to spot a resemblance.

GLEANNING FAQS

BY DAVE BAECHER

This month we are attempting to tackle the most frequently asked questions about gleaning. I endeavored to answer the first hypothetical question and then deferred to volunteers and local farmers to respond to the rest.

1. I MEAN, WHAT IS GLEANING ANYWAY?

Maybe you've been afraid to ask... it falls into that broad category of words that you kind of know that conjure indistinct images of vaguely familiar activities like, say, glamping, galavanting, larping or loitering. Yes, perhaps you'd know it if you saw it. Or perhaps not.

Really, it's a simple idea betrayed by an overly abstract word, quite the opposite of things like math or the big bang (complicated ideas betrayed by overly simple words).

Gleaning is the harvest of leftover, unneeded or commercially non viable crops from farms. The harvest is usually performed by volunteers and happens at the direction and permission of the farmers with the dual goals of mitigating food waste and feeding food insecure populations.

More simply: it's a second harvest for the underserved.

As a practice it has its roots in biblical times when Hebrew farmers were mandated to leave a portion of their crops in the field for food insecure villagers to harvest. In the millenia since, gleaning mostly faded to obscurity, with its few moments of prominence more so defined by controversy than widespread support. It is only in the last decade or so that the practice has begun to enter the mainstream again, though, with a few notable updates to the methods.



Due to the modern realities of scale, land use and geography, it is no longer realistic (or inclusive) for gleaning to happen in a fend-for-yourself type of way. While the image of a solitary villager combing farm fields for personal need carries romantic sentiments and important historical context, the success of present day efforts relies on collaboration between many businesses and organizations and the creation of centralized hubs.

In the modern context, the harvest side of modern day gleaning can be less than half the battle with distribution, processing and value-adding emerging as the most crucial aspects when it comes to maximizing access to local food. In other words, the potential for waste does not end once the food is taken off the farm and- I'd argue- it is even possible to be a gleaner (and a very valuable one at that) without ever harvesting a vegetable.

2. I DON'T HAVE EXPERIENCE HARVESTING VEGETABLES, IS THAT OKAY?

No experience necessary!

I speak from experience when I say you won't be the first gleaner new to harvesting vegetables. Before gleaning, I had no prior experience with gardening,

and my familiarity with raw vegetables was mainly restricted to the clean, glossy varieties that live in the grocery stores. At my first glean we harvested leafy greens, and I asked another gleaner if I was cutting the leaves the right way.

"You're doing it right," she said. "Only that's not the arugula. Do what you were doing, but in this row." In my defense, that weed and the arugula could have been cousins.

Our team leaders are knowledgeable of the farms and the vegetables we glean, and will show you how to harvest them. Plus, we like to work in twos or small groups, so there will always be a friendly face nearby willing to help with that pesky arugula.

—Kristy Douglas, dedicated gleaner since 2018

3. HOW PHYSICALLY CHALLENGING IS GLEANING?

Our gleaning group is primarily made up of women aged 55 and older (although we would welcome with open arms men and younger women) so we tend to be mindful of our body's strengths and weaknesses.

We work together to make tasks easier (lifting heavier things with 2 volunteers) and never ask any



Left: This pear orchard in Bowdoinham was one of the hidden gems of the gleaning season. Right: A pair of gleaners stand out from a forest of leeks at Six River Farm.

volunteer to exceed their limitations. We generally spend 2-3 hrs in the field picking vegetables which are then transported back to MCHPP for distribution.

Gleaning is a very wonderful opportunity to get out on some of our local farms and see how our food is grown. If you like being outside with a group of like minded folks, can stand some bending and lifting, please give us a try...you'll most likely be glad you did!

—Kathie Duncan, dedicated gleaner since 2016

4. HOW DO FARMERS FEEL ABOUT GLEANING? ARE THEY REALLY OKAY WITH THEIR PRODUCTS BEING DISTRIBUTED FOR FREE?

"The gleaning program is very important to us and it helps us to meet one of our core missions on the farm: to provide healthy produce to all of our community. Inevitably, farming is an imperfect art, and we often find ourselves with excess or 2nds grade produce on the farm. We are deeply grateful to the volunteer gleaners who come out to the farm each week and help turn this unharvested produce into food for people in our community."

—Nate Drummond, Co-owner of Six River Farm

"The Merrymeeting Gleaners are an essential partner who make it possible for our farm to give far more than we ever could if we had to deliver the donations ourselves. By showing up every week they help us to give all we can give, with little effort or additional cost to our farm. It's a no-brainer for us to put gleaning dates on the calendar."

—Ben Whatley, Owner of Whatley Farm



Top: Gleaning helps foster a symbiotic relationship between farmers and Hunger Relief Organizations. Bottom: The brilliant colors from a cherry tomato harvest at Harvest Tide Organics.