

STARTING A COMMUNITY GLEANING PROGRAM



Introduction

Gleaning is the act of collecting excess fresh fruits and vegetables from farms, gardens, and orchards (USDA 2010). Gleaning is an ancient practice dating back centuries, with mentions in several religious texts (Hussey 1997). Many communities across the United States utilize gleaning as a way to address both food insecurity and food waste. This publication outlines considerations for forming an effective community gleaning program.

Why Glean?

Community Food Security

In Washington State, one in nine people struggle with hunger (Feeding America 2019). In a 2011 study of Washington women ages eighteen to forty four, 16 percent reported that their household skipped meals or cut the size of meals because there was not enough money to buy food (WSDOH 2018). Gleaning helps address food insecurity by increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables available at food banks, food pantries, senior centers, school classrooms, and other community venues. An effective gleaning program puts healthy, nutrient-dense produce onto the plates of food insecure community members.

Minimizing Food Waste

Food is the largest component of Washington State's municipal solid waste stream. Washington State data from 2015 to 2016 show that food makes up 16 percent of residential garbage, and of this, 8 percent is classified as food that is still edible (WSDE 2018). Rotting food produces methane, a greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change. It is estimated that 18 percent of methane emissions in the United States come from landfills (EPA 2016). By diverting usable produce from landfills, gleaning can reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Benefits to Farmers

Farmers benefit from gleaning as well. Gleaning can minimize the spread of pests or diseases by removing produce from fields or orchards that might otherwise rot or create a breeding ground for harmful organisms. Farms that donate produce are eligible for tax exemptions, and gleaning can increase the visibility of a farm among community members and create exposure to new markets.

Program Elements

Gleaning programs vary in their scale, how they are funded, the products they glean, and who they impact. Despite these differences, gleaning programs typically have the following core elements: coordination of gleaning activities, a team of gleaners, gleaning sites, and recipients of the gleaned products.

Coordination of Gleaning Activities

Gleaning activities around the country are coordinated in a variety of ways. Some include part-time or full-time staff, administrative staff, seasonal field staff, or simply designated volunteer(s) in charge of communication with other gleaners.

Whether paid or volunteer, a gleaning coordinator serves as a central hub to connect gleaners with sites needing to be gleaned. This can be through group emails, online calendars, or personal phone calls that alert volunteers about upcoming gleaning opportunities.

Depending on the level of staffing and scale of the program, a gleaning coordinator can also undertake the many other needs of a program, for example, recruiting gleaners and gleaning sites, establishing partnerships with food banks and other organizations to receive gleaned products, organizing group gleans and other food collection opportunities, managing

distribution of gleaned products, communicating with stakeholders, fundraising, and tracking program metrics.

At Washington State University Clallam County Extension, we have found that in the start-up phase of establishing a gleaning program it is beneficial to have a full-time coordinator to build all aspects of the program. Now that we have established the network of gleaners and gleaning sites and put the tracking systems in place, our program can be minimally operated with as little as ten hours per week of coordinator time during the peak gleaning season.

Gleaners

Volunteer Administration

Although some gleaning programs do not utilize volunteers and are strictly operated by paid staff, the strength and reach of a gleaning program can be expanded through the use of a network of volunteers. The more a program relies on volunteers, the more critical effective volunteer management becomes. Volunteer management has many components, including recruitment, training, management, and retention. Each of these aspects of a volunteer program requires its own systems and organizational structures, depending on how the program is designed. Because so many Extension programs rely on volunteers, including 4-H and Master Gardeners, Extension programs around the country have valuable, in-depth publications and webinars on the topics surrounding volunteer management. The following are examples of resources available for managing an effective volunteer-based program through Extension:

- Michigan State University. n.d. [Volunteer Program Planning and Management Reference Guide](#).
- Texas A&M University. n.d. [Volunteer Administrator Resources](#).

Gleaner Recruitment

Volunteer recruitment methods include:

- Putting an ad in the local newspaper.
- Advertising through social media.
- Distributing fliers throughout the community.
- Connecting with local service clubs, religious organizations, or volunteer organizations.
- Setting up a gleaning information booth at local Farmers Markets, Extension outreach events, or other community events.

At Clallam County Extension, we have found that an effective way to advertise the gleaning program is to hold “kick-off” meetings at the beginning of the season describing how the program is structured and its importance to the community. A kick-off event can also serve as an opportunity for program coordinators to provide safety training, review any program policies, and enroll new members, and for gleaners to meet each other.

Participation and Retention

In a study done in 2018 of 34 gleaners in Clallam County, volunteers cited free food, preventing food waste, and community building as the top three reasons for participating in the gleaning program. The most common barriers to participating in a gleaning program were available time, liability and health concerns, and transportation (Khalid et al. 2018). The ability to keep some of the gleaned product can be a motivator for some volunteers to participate in gleaning activities. The gleaners who were surveyed reported incorporating the gleaned products into their diet through canning, freezing, drying, and snacking.

The gleaning coordinator can encourage future success of the program by giving recognition to those involved. Coordinators can recognize participants (both gleaners and gleaning site owners) at social events, through newspaper stories, through gleaning awards programs, or by sending thank you cards.

Volunteer Policies

Clallam County Extension has developed a volunteer protocol called the 3 C's of Gleaning to guide gleaners in effective participation:

- Call the gleaning site after receiving the phone number from the gleaning coordinator to set up a mutually agreed-upon date and time.
- Come prepared with a ladder or fruit picker, if needed, along with baskets for the produce.
- Carry through with the gleaning commitment. Show up to the gleaning site when expected and on time. Ensure the gleaning site and gleaning coordinator are aware of cancellations.

Other important policies for gleaning volunteers to bear in mind:

- Have clean hands, handle produce gently, and follow appropriate food safety guidance (see inset titled Food Safety Guidelines for Gleaners for further information).
- Safety first. Be aware of the proper use of equipment and any unusual circumstances of the site prior to the gleaning event. This includes the presence of dogs, electric fencing, and sloped or uneven ground.
- Dress accordingly, with sturdy shoes and clothes that can get dirty.
- Respect the site, and only glean what was previously agreed upon.
- Leave the site if you feel uncomfortable with it or with the homeowner, and update gleaning coordinator with this information.

Establishment of Gleaning Sites

Some organizations that operate a gleaning program solely connect individual volunteers to gleaning sites without overarching supervision. Other organizations require that a staff member or trained volunteer be present at every glean to

facilitate the event, ensure the gleaning site is respected, and to prevent injuries. Some gleaners may be uncomfortable with the idea of going out on a glean by themselves and would rather participate in a group event. Group gleans can bring fellowship to the gleaners, create a sense of renewed dedication to the program, and inspire new gleaners to join in. Having supervisors on-site is also better for programs that wish to track the amount of produce collected, as the supervisor can record information while on-site in a consistent manner. A supervisor on-site at a group gleaning event can also ensure that the produce collected arrives at the emergency food organizations, if that is the program's goal and priority, versus going home with individual gleaners.

Private Residences

Most private property owners that participate in the Clallam Extension gleaning program do so because their fruit trees are producing too much for them to store or process themselves (Khalid et al. 2018). Sometimes, they are elderly and do not feel comfortable being on a ladder anymore.

Outreach methods to reach private property owners include:

- Putting an advertisement in the local newspaper or on social media advertising the program and the availability of gleaners to come to homes and private residences.
- Hanging fliers on doors of homeowners with visible fruit trees offering the gleaning service.
- Contacting local orchard societies, garden stores, community gardens, and other locations to advertise the program.

Preseason communication to sites that participated in previous years can help remind and encourage property owners to continue participating in the program.

To facilitate the gleaning of the site, the gleaning coordinator should determine from the landowner in advance how many trees are on the property, what state of ripeness the fruit is in, any obstacles to accessing the trees (for example, locked gates or guard dogs), the preferred time to glean, and any other important considerations for being safely on-site. See the section on Risk Management and Liability for a discussion on protections for landowners.

Commercial Farms

There are additional factors that need to be considered when gleaning on commercial farms rather than private residences. It is critical to work closely with the farm manager to make sure the farm's rules and expectations are understood and followed by gleaners. In order for a farm glean to be successful, the event must follow the correct timing as well as provide consistency and reliability of the gleaning team. It is recommended that a gleaning leader who is in regular communication with the farmer be on-site at all times to ensure that the farm's rules and expectations are met. Additional considerations are necessary if crops under federal crop insurance are being gleaned. For a discussion on gleaning under the FCIC, refer to [Gleaning Crops](#), produced by the USDA Risk Management Agency (2017).

Some farms choose to have their own employees or trusted volunteers do the gleaning to minimize inconvenience or misunderstandings. Farmers may want to consider claiming a tax deduction for gleaned product. Refer to the section on Tax Deductions for more information on this topic.

Gleaning Recipients

Gleaning programs have the potential to bring in thousands of pounds of new produce to a receiving location. Many food banks and pantries in small communities have limited capacity for storing fresh produce. Initial coordination with receiving entities is essential to the success of the program or the sites could quickly be overwhelmed with the amount of gleaned product. For a program to be successful, it is critical that the gleaning coordinator work closely with the recipient organizations to understand what types and quality of produce they accept, their capacity for refrigeration and storage, and what dates and times they are able to receive donations. Regular communication with the recipients throughout the gleaning season helps to keep the program functioning and the partners willing and engaged.

Having close relationships with donation sites can also aid in referring new landowners to the gleaning program. Food banks in Clallam County frequently refer people to the Clallam Extension gleaning program who want to donate produce but would like the food bank to come pick it up. Food banks rarely have the capacity to make home pickups, so it is helpful to be able to refer potential produce donors to a gleaning coordinator with an existing volunteer base.

Further food distribution avenues can be explored via partnerships with food policy councils or hunger coalitions to expand distribution sites beyond food banks and food pantries.

Some gleaning programs choose to identify specific gleaning recipients, others leave it up to the gleaners' discretion where they would like to donate. In some programs, gleaners may also donate to individual members of the community who are in need.

Possible produce donation sites include:

- Schools
- Boys and Girls Clubs of America
- YMCA
- Community meal sites (Salvation Army, church-sponsored community meals)
- Senior centers
- Senior meal delivery programs
- Tribal food banks
- Veterans programs
- Shelters
- Healthcare facilities
- Religious organizations

Clearly identifying the program's goals and priorities will inform the appropriate design of the gleaning program. Is the program's primary goal to reduce food waste? If so, it may not be important if the gleaned product ends up mostly with individual gleaners as opposed to specific food banks or food pantries. If the program's goals prioritize food access over food waste, the program design should emphasize site supervision and tracking to ensure that produce is ending up at the intended destinations.

Other Considerations for Program Implementation

Equipment

Programs may choose to provide equipment for gleaners to borrow, including ladders, sturdy baskets or boxes for collecting gleaned product, scales for weighing produce, and fruit-picking tools. Some gleaning sites may have equipment available for the gleaners to use. Equipment used for gleaning should be cleaned and sanitized prior to use and be in good working condition (e.g., no rust, burrs, dirt). See the Food Safety Guidelines for Gleaners inset for more detailed information.

Tracking Gleaned Produce

Tracking program metrics is important for showing impacts, securing funding and support, and identifying changes from year to year that may bear investigation and consideration. However, it also requires time, effort, and effective protocols to be in place, which in itself can be challenging for programs that lack capacity for administration and oversight.

Organizations throughout the country have different strategies for tracking gleaned produce. Generally, programs track the number of gleanings in a season and number of volunteers participating. More robust tracking metrics include the type of produce items collected at individual gleanings, weight, where it was gleaned, and where it was donated.

Tracking methods can be basic, as when gleaning supervisors handwrite the information at a gleaning site, then transfer the data to an excel sheet or software database, or more complex, involving the use of inventory databases created and specialized for their programs, such as GleanWeb or Salesforce.

Tax Deductions

In 2015, Congress passed an enhanced tax deduction for all businesses, including farms, that donate food to qualified organizations (Blazek et al. 2016). Qualified organizations are defined in the US Internal Revenue Tax Code as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that uses the food "solely to care for the ill, the needy, or infants." The recipient organization cannot use or transfer the food for money, property, or services. The 2015 legislation increased the cap on deductible food donations to up to 15

percent of the business's total taxable income each year as well as allows them to carry forward any excess deductions for up to five years (Natural Resources Defense Council 2016).

Risk Management and Liability

Protection for Gleaners

There are both state and federal laws that provide liability protection for people engaged in food recovery activities, including gleaning. In 1996, the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act was passed into law by President Clinton which minimizes liability for gleaners (Haley 2013). In addition, in Washington State, the Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, passed in 1994, states that food donors or gleaners are not subject to civil or criminal liability arising from the donation of "apparently wholesome food" to a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving needy individuals. However, the gleaner or person who donates food could be subject to liability in cases of gross negligence or intentional misconduct (RCW 1994).

Gleaners are further protected under the federal Volunteer Protection Act of 1997 (Congressional Record 1997). This act declares that the volunteers' good intentions and willingness to offer their services frees them from potential liabilities. They should not be held liable for harm or injury caused by an act or omission if they were acting within their responsibilities as part of a nonprofit organization or governmental entity. However, there are some limitations on volunteer liabilities in the Volunteer Protection Act:

- Volunteers can be held liable if they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- Volunteers can be held liable if their actions constituted a hate crime, sexual offense, or an act of terrorism or violence.

Protection for Property Owners

The Washington State Good Samaritan Food Donation Act also provides protection for a property owner allowing the gleaning to occur. The Act states:

"A person who allows the collection or gleaning of donations on property owned or occupied by the person by gleaners, or paid or unpaid representatives of a nonprofit organization, for ultimate distribution to needy individuals is not subject to civil or criminal liability that arises due to the injury or death of the gleaner or representative, except that this subsection does not apply to an injury or death that results from an act or omission of the person constituting gross negligence or intentional misconduct" (RCW 1994).

Despite the protections afforded by federal and state laws to both gleaners and property owners, many organizations choose to take additional precautions in protecting their volunteers. In an informal survey of 16 gleaning organizations around the country, conducted in 2018 by Clallam County Extension, eight organizations reported they have volunteers sign waivers, and

eight of the organizations reported that they have additional insurance coverage for their volunteer activities.

It is important to note that gleaned food cannot be sold if the gleaner, host organization, or gleaning site is to be protected from liability by the Good Samaritan Food Donation Act. The Act specifies that food must be donated to a nonprofit organization.

Funding

Gleaning programs throughout the country receive funding through a variety of sources, such as grants, donations, fundraisers, sponsorships, and federal or state funds. Many local businesses and food banks provide funding as well.

Several sources of funding that have been useful to Extension offices funding gleaning programs include:

- AmeriCorps VISTA positions through Harvest Against Hunger.
- Direct funding through county budgets.
- Partnerships with other county departments, such as Solid Waste, Environmental Health, or Public Health.
- Washington Department of Ecology Local Solid Waste Financial Assistance.
- USDA grant opportunities.

Combining the Elements: An Example of an Extension-Based Gleaning “Matchmaking” Program

The gleaning program through Clallam County Extension includes a gleaning coordinator, gleaners, farmers, residential property owners, and several partner organizations that receive the gleaned produce. Rather than have a group of volunteers that Extension manages and oversees, the program acts as a “matchmaking service” between people interested in gleaning and available sites.

The coordinator serves as a contact point for farms and property owners that have gleaning opportunities throughout the harvest season. They provide their contact information to the gleaning coordinator, a description of the type of produce available, and any other important information about the gleaning site, such as the presence of dogs, availability of ladders at the site, and height of the trees. The gleaning coordinator then includes the gleaning site with a description of the type(s) of produce and a general location (city or town name) in a newsletter that goes out to people who have signed up to receive the gleaning notifications. The specific addresses and phone numbers of homeowners are not listed. If a person or group of people is interested in gleaning a particular site, they then contact the coordinator, who provides them the site’s email or phone

number. Then the gleaner independently contacts the owner of the gleaning site to arrange a date for the gleaning, learns the exact address of the site, and finds out any other relevant information. After the glean, the gleaners may take up to half of the produce and then donate the other half to a location of their choice.

Further Resources

[Harvest Against Hunger](#) (formerly Rotary First Harvest Harvest) is a national program that utilizes a team of AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers to engage in gleaning and food recovery programs in their communities.

The USDA’s “[Let’s Glean! United We Serve Toolkit](#)” has further information and resources on establishing a gleaning program.

The [Society of St. Andrew](#), a national gleaning network, has gleaning program directors across several eastern states that oversee regional gleaning networks. These organizations are resources for supporting the establishment of new programs.

The [National Gleaning Project](#), conducted by the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems at the Vermont Law School, is an excellent resource on the legal issues associated with gleaning, including protections afforded by the law for food donors and landowners participating in gleaning programs.

Food Recovery Network’s “[Guide to Gleaning](#).” Geared towards college and university students, this handbook outlines considerations for establishing food recovery programs.

Food Safety for Gleaning Operations

People facing food insecurity tend to also be at high risk for foodborne illness. To protect the safety of the consumers and food being gleaned, stringent food safety policies should be followed. By following these protocols, you can help ensure that the recipients receive safe food.

- Never harvest or handle produce if you are ill.
- Never harvest visibly contaminated produce, or produce that has been dropped.
- Never harvest produce that has been in contact with animals or is near feces.
- Hands should be washed thoroughly with potable water and soap for 20 seconds, then dried with a clean paper towel. Hands must always be washed:
 - After using the restroom.
 - Before harvesting produce.
 - Before putting on gloves.
 - Before and after eating, drinking, or smoking.
 - After touching animals or animal waste.
 - Anytime hands may have become contaminated.
- If wearing gloves while harvesting produce, the gloves must be kept clean. If gloves become contaminated, they should be replaced with clean gloves.
- Never bring pets or other animals onto the farm or into any food operation facilities. Do not allow animals to ride in the vehicle that is being used for transporting gleaned food.
- Equipment should be in good repair and properly cleaned:
 - Examine harvesting equipment to ensure it has been cleaned prior to using.
 - Ensure the equipment is in good repair and does not contain anything that could become a physical hazard, such as rust, burrs, or broken pieces.
 - Bins and other containers used to hold produce should be properly cleaned and sanitized prior to use:
 - Wash bins with a food grade detergent.
 - Rinse with clean potable water.
 - Apply a sanitizing agent approved for food contact surfaces per the label directions.
 - Allow to air dry in a clean place.
 - Never place containers used to hold produce on the ground without placing a clean barrier (e.g., tarp) under the container.
 - Never take clean gloves, equipment, or harvest containers into the restroom.
 - Ladders can contaminate clean gloves. To avoid contaminating gloves, hold onto the ladder from the sides when climbing up or down or when carrying the ladder.
- Ensure footwear is kept clean:
 - Have separate, designated footwear for animal areas versus produce-growing and packing areas.
- Always transport produce in a sanitary manner:
 - Ensure the vehicle is clean.
 - Do not allow produce to come into contact with contaminants, such as chemicals, dirt, or animals.

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