

Gleaning for the Hungry

by Rusten Hogness
[all photos by Marco Harding]

Spotting a large, white bulb, Mary Schapper bends down and grabs the stalks. She slides the sharp, flat top of the harvesting knife into the soil just below the surface and severs the roots. Straightening up, she brushes off the dirt and trims the last bit of dangling root. Then, holding the bulb, she swings the knife twice, whacking off most of the lacy top of the fennel plant. Tossing the bulb into a black plastic crate, she's already looking for the next one.



"I had no idea what we'd be doing out here," says Schapper. "I thought I'd be crawling on the ground picking strawberries. So, this is great!"

The morning air is full of the licorice-like smell of the fennel. Schapper will fill her crate with a dozen or more fennel bulbs, then pick up the crate and carry it to the truck, where her crate and the crates of the 40 or so other gleaners will be dumped into one of the 4' by 4', 3-foot-high cardboard bins. Then she'll head back into the field to find enough fennel to fill her crate again. ... and again.

Today it's fennel. The gleaners also salvage lettuce, broccoli, onions, celery ... whatever is left in the field after the harvest before the tractors roll in to till it all back into the soil. They glean and carry until the 18 to 20 bins the truck holds are full. This morning it takes just a couple of hours.



Ananda Jimenez, who coordinates volunteer gleaners for Ag Against Hunger, calls out, "OK, that's it. You can glean for yourself."

Schapper won't take any fennel home. "I'm not a big fan of fennel," she laughs. "I hope they get this to folks who are."

The fennel from this field near Castroville will go back to the Ag Against Hunger coolers in Salinas. Within a couple of days, it will be on trucks going to food banks as far away as Sacramento, though most of it will stay here in San Benito, Monterey, and Santa Cruz counties.

"We really need to give more to the food community that supplies food for the needy because I know there's an increasing need," says Schapper, who will be managing the medical treatment center at Soledad prison after working at Natividad Medical Center for 27 years as a nurse manager. "Lots of employees I see are really hurting. They have to hit the food banks to make ends meet."

It would be hard not to see the need, she says. "It's in the media, it's in my workplace, it's in the neighborhood, it's everywhere."

Food banks in the area estimate that as many as one in four families is short of food some time during the year. One in seven gets some kind of food aid. Second Harvest Food Bank predicts a 30% increase in seniors and working families needing food aid this year because of the economic downturn.

So Schapper and other gleaners give up a Saturday morning to help provide fresh produce to food banks. Young and old, some in a group from a church or high school, some alone, all work together to make a difference.

"We all have some responsibility," says Schapper. "I had some time on my hands. I figured it was a way to give back to the community, and it wasn't going to cost me anything except time. And, why not?"



A Life of Gleaning

Mary Schapper, 65, is no stranger to farm work or to gleaning. She grew up on a farm near Cedar Rapids, Nebraska, where the family grew most of their own vegetables and raised chickens and a few pigs.

Money was tight, say Schapper, and from an early age, she and her siblings did what they could to help out. During corn harvest, that meant gleaning.

“We'd always go out and pick up corn in the fields in the evenings,” Schapper remembers. Neighbors would let them go into the corn fields before they put the cows in it to graze.

“We had an old car that we took the back seat out of,” says Schapper, “so we just piled the corn in there.”

glean (glEEen)

verb *tr & intr* gleaned, gleaning

To collect (loose grain and other useful remnants of a crop left in a field) after harvesting.

To collect (information, etc) bit by bit, often with difficulty.
synonyms: cull, gather, amass, collect, learn, pick up

There were always a few ears that had been left on the ground. “We'd pick 'em up in 5-gallon cans, because that was about all we could carry. Then we'd go dump it in the car.” On a good day, she recalls, “it'd come up to about the windows in the back.” Several bushels. Then their father would drive the car to the grain elevator and get it weighed.

But while the three older children were in the field gleaning the corn, they were on their own. Their father would drive the car to the edge of the field and leave them to it. “We were allowed to move the car forward in the field,” she says, as they worked their way across acres of corn rows.

Just 10 and 11 years old, the sisters were too small to drive the car alone, so one would steer while the other pushed on the gas. Once, remembers Schapper, the car just rocketed out of control. “We started really just zooming across the ridges in the corn field. My brother had to get out of the back seat and turn off the key. He was about 6 years old at the time. And he had enough common sense to do that.” Schapper laughs at the memory.

Gleaning was a way of life for a farm family struggling to make ends meet. Berries, cherries, anything they found to supplement the food they grew and what they could barter for.

“To the day my Dad died,” says Schapper, “he was out picking choke cherries at the side of the road. So, he was a gleaner from day number one until he was 94.”

Mary Schapper may have left the farm, but she didn't leave that gleaning tradition behind.

