

Harvest

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A diverse agricultural community

In July, Salem Harvest sent group after group of volunteers to harvest Thomas Barnett's broccoli in Aurora. Barnett grew the crop for processing, but when harvest time came he couldn't secure a crew of workers. It made more sense to move on, turning the field over to replant it rather than get behind.

Low pollination in watermelons at Northwest Transplants in Molalla left the fruit with hollow heart, an interior air pocket deemed undesirable by distributors. Salem Harvest picked so many they nearly overwhelmed local agencies. Marion Polk Food Share offered watermelon to other food banks throughout the state.

Volunteers collected more after Labor Day, perfect fruit ripening despite the idea that consumer whims had moved on from summer flavors to pumpkin spice.

Terry Beilke grows ten acres of blueberries and apples at Beilke Family Farm in Brooks. His family hosts Salem Harvest volunteers to pick both.

"We've done this for eight or ten years with them," Beilke said. "It's a very good partnership, they're very well organized, they leave our orchard respectfully and in good shape. Plus we see our fruit going to good use in the community and we appreciate that."

Some growers are eligible to receive a 15% Oregon state tax credit for their produce donations, but there's an intangible payoff, too, as Beilke said, "it's a good feeling to help people who are hungry and who have other issues."

Onions too small to be picked up by the mechanical harvester, hazelnuts from trees too young to warrant passes with professional equipment and sweet corn from stalks grown to be autumnal decorations; the diverse agricultural community of the Mid-Valley makes Salem Harvest's work possible.

"Our partner agencies have told us that fresh fruits and vegetables are one of the most desirable items," said Kendra Alexander, Marion Polk Food Share's Director of Food Resourcing and Warehouse Operations. Salem Harvest's model of providing "not just fresh produce but also a variety of different kinds of fresh produce has a huge impact on our community."

Salem Harvest isn't alone in this work. Willamette University students operate the only Oregon chapter of the



Todd Springstead, a volunteer for Salem Harvest, reaches to grab a bag of broccoli being handed to him from the field as people pick them at a broccoli farm near Canby on July 20. Salem Harvest is a nonprofit organization that rescues fresh produce that would otherwise go to waste. KELLY JORDAN/STATESMAN JOURNAL

nationwide Food Recovery Network, re-packaging and donating perishable food from campus dining halls. Farmers Ending Hunger is a similar food rescue organization that specializes in processing fresh food into less perishable formats by canning, freezing, and otherwise packaging them for distribution.

"Salem Harvest plays a vital role in terms of being able to go harvest the product straight from the farm," Alexander said. "That's not something we have the ability to do with our resources."

Bauman credits the partnership between the two organizations as essential to Salem Harvest's growth. The fact that Marion Polk Food Share provides refrigeration and handles distribution allows her to focus on the supply side.

Sometimes, the organization bypasses the Food Share, delivering entire bins of food directly to agencies.

"That food," said Alexander, "is literally going from the farm to the pantry into the hands of people who need it."

How does Salem Harvest work?

Gleaning is a term often used for the process of on-farm food rescue, but it's a term Bauman avoids.

"When I first started talking to growers they said don't use that word [because] it has a negative connotation." Growers thought of gleaners as lacking professionalism, accountability and respect.

"We want to differentiate ourselves from the historical, typical gleaning organization. We want to be known as a powerhouse, that you can call upon us not to just come out and take a few greens, but to take tons. To get as much done as we can."

How you can help:

- Register to volunteer at a Salem Harvest
- Host Salem Harvest volunteers on your farm or in your garden
- Volunteer at Marion Polk Food Share
- Give a financial contribution
- Make an in-kind contribution of equipment or resources

registered volunteers sign up and then show up. The harvest leader explains why a crop is available, what to collect and what to avoid.

The organization's volunteers represent diverse ages, races and socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents come with babies strapped to their backs and multiple generations of the same family work together. Regulars get acquainted while working alongside one another. A couple speaks Japanese, another Russian. One family sings while they pick blueberries.

The atmosphere at harvests is efficient but casual; more focused than the average apple picking trip, but less than that of a team of professionals.

A factor that contributes to the organization's robust volunteer network, said Bauman, is that volunteers are allowed to keep a portion of what they harvest for their own use. The general rule is that at least half of what a volunteer harvests must be donated. It's an incentive that helps ensure the human power will be there when the organization needs it.

There are those who abuse the privilege. Bauman has had to ask volunteers not to come harvest when they have routinely brought young children to farms with specified age restrictions; when they routinely cancel late or no-show; and when they steal, helping themselves to something not designated for harvest.

"For me," she said, "that's just a line you don't cross."

After each harvest, Bauman or another volunteer truck the food to an agency, usually Marion Polk Food Share. Groups of re-pack volunteers divide contents bulk bins into bags. The Food Share then distributes the food throughout its network of member agencies.

Often, food rescued by Salem Harvest reaches its end user just days after the grower makes the initial phone call.

Non-profit in residence

Technically, Salem Harvest has an of-

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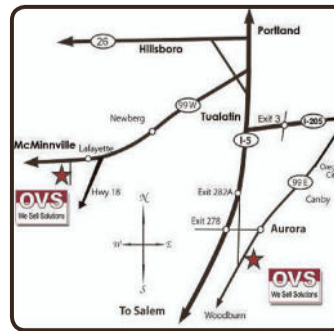
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