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perspectives from across the globe

Interfaith Gleaning Gardens

One Path to Better Food Sufficiency

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Throughout history, land-owners and farmers either had their crops harvested or harvested the crops themselves, but they did not make a concentrated effort to pick every thing that grew in their fields. Harvesting was done in a single pass at the land. Some of the smaller and less perfect fruit and grain were left standing in the field. Those items that were not ripe at the time of harvesting were left behind in the field. These less than perfect and/or late-maturing crops were left for those who needed them but could not afford to purchase them. They were allowed to use their own labor to harvest the remaining crops from the fields for their own use. This process was called gleaning.

All major religions express a concern for the poor and hungry. And many landowners and farmers allowed people to glean after the harvesters had picked the crop, rather than let that food go to waste. This is not the same as charity; it simply is an example of being a good neighbor and showing concern for those less fortunate who are willing to expend effort to receive food.

Modern agriculture, especially large agribusiness, uses machines to harvest the crops. These machines tend to come through the field and mow down everything in sight and then extract the perfect produce from whatever has been mowed down. This approach removes the possibility of having anything

left behind for gleaning. Individual farmers who own smaller farms have tried to address this by planting extra rows of produce that can be left for those who need it. Other groups, such as the Chester County Interfaith Gleaning Gardens, have addressed this by actually establishing gardens that are tended by concerned people of faith, where the output of the gardens is given to those in need.

Connecting Produce and People

Those are two ways that the concept of gleaning has been brought up to date. But there are some problems that need to be addressed, especially, how those in need get to the produce or how the produce gets to those in need. Many of those in need don't live near where the food is grown and do not have transportation to those sites.

Chester County Pennsylvania has an answer to both of those questions – the Chester County Food Bank (CCFB). County government has established this organization to help that happen. The CCFB solicits the aid of local farmers to plant extra rows of crops and/or to make land available for volunteers to garden on their land. They also solicit the help of local faith organizations to either establish a garden on their own property or to work with local businesses to build raised bed gardens, where the entire harvest goes to the CCFB.

In addition, they have made connections with the various stores that sell food to pick up their overstock for distribution to those in need. They have a distribution center, with refrigeration and a large commercial level kitchen, so that food and meals can be prepared and frozen for subsequent distribution. There are a number of Food Pantries in various locations around the county that are close to people in need. There are assessment procedures to determine those who qualify and procedures that determine, based on family size, how much can be “shopped for” with each visit. So the Food Pantries are one solution to bringing the food and the people together.

The concept of people of faith, working together, to plant and tend gardens around the county, is going into its fifth year. This program was started as a result of three people working to try to bring the different faiths closer together through a common service project. Then County Commissioner Andrew Dinniman was asked “What project might be undertaken to allow people of faith to work together for the betterment of the people of Chester County and to get to know each other better?” And his answer was a project of common gleaning gardens, where the output would go to those in need in Chester County. Chester County is a relatively wealthy county and no one should have a food need that was not being met, but there were people going to bed hungry in Chester County.

Since none of the three congregations had adequate space on their grounds to develop a garden, Commissioner (now State Senator) Dinniman helped locate a plot of ground for the first interfaith garden. It is located behind the Chester County Paint and Design Center in Downingtown, PA. The owner, Maury Kring, allowed unused space behind the store to be converted into a garden. He contributed \$500 toward building the raised beds and planting the first season's crop. And what became the Chester County Interfaith Gleaning Gardens has been growing ever since. The first season involved an Islamic Mosque, a Jewish Synagogue, a Unitarian-Universalist congregation, two Methodist congregations, and a Vineyard congregation.

The Gleaning Garden

The initial garden was built upon the square-foot gardening design of Mel Bartholomew, from his book *Square-Foot Gardening*. The garden featured raised beds and a special soil mix of peat moss, vermiculite, and compost. (This was partly because the three coordinators didn't know a whole lot about gardening and here was a book that laid it all out.) This special soil mix and the raised beds greatly reduce the need for weeding. Each square foot of the garden was outlined by strips of lathe, and the idea was that each square foot could contain a different vegetable. Vegetables all have different space

requirements. Each square foot was to be planted in a square pattern of one, four, nine, or sixteen seeds. By planting the seeds in a regular pattern based on the necessary space between plants, the weeds could be differentiated from the vegetables by the fact that “they didn’t belong where they were growing within that square foot.” It was a good plan, but it didn’t work with more than a dozen people doing the planting, some of whom were experienced gardeners and “knew” how things should be done. The one-foot squares were abandoned in the second season, but the raised beds with a maximum size of 4x4 were retained. This never required anyone to reach more than two feet to get to any plant in the bed, which made things much easier for picking.

The gardens are not certified as organic, but no pesticides or fertilizers, other than compost, are used. And most of the volunteers are either gardeners themselves who do not use fertilizers or pesticides, or people of good will who “just want to help however they can” and are willing to do physical tasks. They simply need to be directed as to what, where, and when. There was an occasion when the outer leaves of cabbages were harvested instead of collard greens, due to imprecise instructions, but all in all, things go smoothly. Vegetables are now labeled more clearly in the beds.

The groups involved in the Chester County Interfaith Gleaning Gardens have changed over the years. There are now five gardens in our enterprise, two of them on the grounds of religious organizations and three in other places. The original garden is still being tended, and there is one behind a business that sells security devices and one on the property of one of the townships in Chester County. In these three gardens, there are over 800 sq ft of ground being planted. The two gardens on religious grounds are with the Friends and the Latter-Day Saints. And the involvement of the different faith groups is all on an individual level. The Friends built and maintain their own garden, with some help with the watering. The Latter-Day Saints have a combination community garden for members of their congregation and a gleaning section for the CCFB. The Chester County Interfaith Gleaning Gardens and the CCFB provide consulting services and provide some of the seeds and plants (potatoes). Both congregations assist in the three common gardens, as well. The Jewish Synagogue has since gone their own way. They have planted a garden on their premises and they use it as a service project for their youth, with the produce going to the CCFB.

Chester County previously had a program of renting out space for community gardens, that is, gardens that people can plant and grow their own produce. With the economic downturn and budget cuts, active support for that program at the county level has been significantly reduced. The original concept of gleaning, the concept of having those in need actually participating in the getting their own food, is not now actively being pursued.

The Future of Community Gardens

For several reasons, the concept of community gardens may become more widely accepted and practiced in the future. First, it is better for the people receiving the produce to be involved actually growing their own produce. This is a variation on the original concept of gleaning where people would harvest the fields themselves to get the bounty of the land. The personal involvement in growing one’s own food and determining what to grow is beneficial. And it is not charity.

In addition, raised bed gardening using procedures without chemical fertilizers and pesticides is a big step for sustainable gardening and away from the need for petrochemicals in food production. The growing of food locally avoids the fuel used to transport produce from wherever it is grown to the local market. And the size of the gardens makes it reproducible on small plots of ground that can be tended by a small number of people.

Finally, community gleaning can help people move away from dependency and toward self-reliance, with the government doing what it can to help without spending a great amount of money. This is a possible win-win situation for all involved, both now while the economy is still in the doldrums and

in the long term as a path to self-sufficiency, at least to increased food availability. And the food would be healthy and home-grown.

To implement community gardening, sections of public land can be made available at a reasonable cost (or free) for each growing season. The willingness of businesses and religious organizations can make private land available, as well, with the right oversight and control. The key is to get available land that is accessible, especially to those who have to use the food banks.

The next step is to get participation from those who use the food banks in the growing of food in the existing Gleaning Gardens. It is recognized that those using the food banks are stressed economically, often due to the loss of a job or some type of disability. But that may not preclude their ability to help out in the gardens on an as needed, as convenient basis. (In the Gleaning Gardens today, it is not uncommon for a mother to bring the children along, to help or just to observe. Because pesticides are not used, there is little that could be harmful to a youngster in the gardens.) The “as needed-as convenient” is the exact same basis for participation that the faith group members use today. With proper coordination, participation in the existing gardens should not take away from their job search time.

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org or post on FUTUREtakes blog):

- *In this issue of FUTUREtakes, the article by Irfan & Irfan discuss the impact of high technology on everyday life via IT, whereas the articles by Eichhorn and by Roba discuss the impact of high tech on agriculture. What cultural factors might moderate the impact of high technology among various peoples, and in what ways?*
- *In what ways might local food preferences and customs make innovative approaches to food production – such as those discussed by Eichhorn – more or less attractive, and why?*
- *What other trends and “wild cards” (unexpected events, often sudden) might lead to innovative approaches in food production? In addition to localized growing of food as discussed by Eichhorn, what other innovative approaches to food products and distribution might emerge within the next 15 years, and why?*
- *How might increasing cross-cultural interaction impact consumer food preferences and agricultural practices in your part of the world?*
- *Might pressures to increase agricultural yield per acre – to meet expanding global demand for food – lead to changes in consumer choices (for example, more vegetables but less meat)? In addition to gleaning gardens, what other new agricultural practices and technologies might emerge to meet the increasing demand?*