

OVERVIEW

The Community Kitchen had its sixth gleaning season in 2018. Despite some challenges experienced by local producers, we collected 31,858 pounds of excess produce in Cheshire County. It was another banner year for cucumbers, zucchini, and summer squash. On the other hand, what limited amounts of some crops, such as apples, were able to survive the unpredictable weather patterns, were often victims of the hungry wildlife.



Despite these challenges, as well as the disruptions of a large-scale reconstruction project at The Community Kitchen, we were able to offer a consistent, quality program of nutritious hot meals and pantry goods throughout the season. In fact, I have noticed that fresh food offerings within the larger charitable food system have been gaining strength in recent years. The charitable food system is a nested ecosystem in which The Community Kitchen receives distributions from the USDA, the Vermont Food Bank, and the New Hampshire Food Bank. These organizations are networked through Feeding America, which manages large scale distributions of excess food across North America. More and more, fresh produce has been captured into this system, so that we have seen stocks of Georgia peaches and eggplants, Canadian cucumbers, and regional hothouse tomatoes in our refrigerators. These supplies of fresh produce are a welcome source of nutrients for our patrons and they represent positive efforts to reduce waste and support producers across the country. At the same time, they challenge our local program to be creative with the brief but sometimes overwhelming seasonal abundance of specific local crops.



OUTREACH & ADVOCACY

I had several opportunities to engage in community education and outreach around hunger and poverty in 2018. I continued to participate in a number of partner advocacy groups and networks including the Greater Keene Homelessness Coalition, Monadnock Interfaith Project, Monadnock Understands Childhood Hunger, and Leadership Monadnock. The Greater Keene Homelessness Coalition developed three initiatives in 2018 that supported better community awareness of vulnerable community members and strengthened the safety net for them, including a training module (presented on two occasions) for volunteers in any community organization that supports struggling community members; a series of newspaper articles aimed at raising awareness of the relatable stories of these struggles; and monthly “community resources nights” at The Community Kitchen, where various social service organizations attended suppers and took the opportunity to connect with clients while they were in the building for their dinner.

I took some opportunities to engage in community education specifically about food systems and the gleaning project. I gave a presentation at a local high school, appeared on two local cable television shows, and arranged for our charitable gardening partners to appear on a local cable television show. I participated with an informational table at the annual Earth Day celebration as well as three “First Friday” events in the Keene downtown area. I hosted an event in the winter for gleaning volunteers to consult with regular volunteers about their ideas to strengthen the project and to prepare them for the new season.

During the early spring of 2018, I visited six smaller pantries across Cheshire County to learn about their collections of fresh produce and opportunities to share the bounty that comes in to The Community Kitchen. I also gave a presentation to the Monadnock Time Exchange about gleaning, which allowed me to tap in to a new source of volunteers, who were able to earn “hours” on the time exchange for the time they spent gleaning (see “stories” for more details).

As usual, I attended many food systems-related events in the community, including the Seed Celebration, the Cornucopia Project’s “S.K.I.T.T.L.” presentation, NOFA NH Conference, NH Food Alliance Gathering, the Slow Living Summit, and Radically Rural, formally and informally sharing information about gleaning with diverse community members. I also co-hosted six potluck lunches and an Earth Day “after party” for food-centric community organizers, offering opportunities for informal networking and generating new ideas for strengthening our food system in the Monadnock Region (see “stories” for more about our partnership with the WIC program).

The Community Kitchen’s website was redesigned by Keene Web Works in 2018 and a blog was established for our use. I was trained by our web designer in the use of the blog, but did not follow through on putting it to use. However, we will have a marketing intern in the winter of 2019 and it is our intention to use the blog and social media more effectively starting in 2019.

GLEANINGS

In 2018, the gleaning project collected a total of 31,858 pounds of produce. Volunteers and I made about 100 trips to collect previously harvested produce at the Keene Farmer’s Market and commercial farms. Some farmers also stopped at The Community Kitchen and dropped off donations. New Dawn Farm made regular deliveries to Joan’s Pantry in Chesterfield, which were recorded in our database. We harvested produce at about a dozen field gleans this year, including basil and winter squash at Pete’s Stand, blueberries at Cheshire Garden and Crescendo Acres Farm, and blueberries and green beans at Nye Hill Farm. Commercial producers contributed 27,653 pounds of excess produce to our programs this year.

Farm	Total Gleans	Pounds Donated
Picadilly Farm	26	10359
Green Wagon	23	6290
Pete's Stand	33	6116
New Dawn Farm	19	2797
Keene Farmer's Market	33	989

Cheshire Garden	4	495
Hemlock Hill Farm	1	206
Nye Hill Farm	10	171
Walpole Valley Farms	4	97
Sun Moon Farm	1	48
Maple Homestead Farm	1	44
Crescendo Acres Farm	1	11

Six charitable gardens were operated by our partner businesses and organizations in 2018. In addition to companies that have grown produce for The Community Kitchen in the past, W. S. Badger & Co. dedicated employee time and company space to grow food for us in 2018, contributing 405 pounds of fresh produce to our programs. Antioch University New England continued to operate the Westmoreland Garden Project on space leased from Cheshire County, where they added a hoop house and were able to produce 1212 pounds of produce for The Community Kitchen in 2018. C & S Wholesale Grocers employees, in collaboration with graduate students from Antioch University, grew food for The Community Kitchen for their sixth year. In 2018, students and volunteers took charge of all tasks related to the project and were able to harvest and deliver 994 pounds of produce to The Community Kitchen. In total, 2,695 pounds of produce were grown in charitable gardens in 2018.



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Charitable Garden	Total Gleans	Pounds Donated
Westmoreland Garden Project	35	1212
Badger Co	17	405
Liberty Mutual	24	394
C&S Summit	12	321
C&S Optical	16	279
UPS Garden	9	84

Some organizations in our region have on-site gardens to serve the needs of their constituents (such as campers, residents, and visitors), and these gardens sometimes exceed the needs of their eaters. The Community Kitchen received donations from four of these gardens in 2018, adding 1,079 pounds of produce donations to our gleaning totals.

Donor	Total Gleans	Pounds Donated
St Benedict Center	4	840
Camp Glen Brook	2	130
Apple Hill	1	100
Keene Housing Authority	2	9



In addition, at least 20 individual home gardeners made drop-off donations of fresh garden produce at The Community Kitchen on 51 occasions, amounting to 461 pounds of produce over the 2018 growing season.

Once again, cucumbers, summer squash, and zucchini represented the most abundant crops in 2018. These crops are typically strong in our region, but weather conditions were especially favorable to them this year, while they were overall challenging for many crops. A cool, wet spring was followed by a period of drought, then another cool and very wet fall. The wildlife ecosystem was in flux this year as a mast year in 2017 brought an abundance of rodents and smaller wild creatures who faced a dearth of forest foods in 2018. As a result, many farmers in our region experienced significant crop losses. Still, apart from the lack of apples, the types of crops that made a strong showing in the 2018 gleaning

program were fairly typical compared to previous years.

Crop	Weight
cucumbers	6076
summer squash & zucchini	5477
corn	3087
winter squash	2958
sweet potatoes	2423
tomatoes	1939
carrots	1519
lettuce & salad greens	805
melons	749
other/unsorted produce	736
potatoes	730
kale	696

Crop	Weight
peppers, sweet & hot	469
pears	440
green beans & drying beans	435
eggplant	427
beets	372
cabbage & napa cabbage	301
asian greens	265
radishes & daikons	241
scallions & leeks	207
swiss chard	193
arugula	156
turnips	145

Crop	Weight
bread	138
herbs	110
parsnips	105
celery & celeriac	104
braising greens	100
kohlrabi	75
blueberries	61
fennel	44
maple syrup	44
broccoli	34
peas	33

Crop	Weight
spinach	24
apples	18
rhubarb	13
peaches	12
garlic	11
raspberries	10
soap	10
okra	9
eggs	4
flowers, cut	4
micro greens	2
asparagus	1



VOLUNTEERS

Fifteen volunteers attended at least one Community Kitchen gleaning event in 2018, while several more volunteers attended the focus group and offered support to the project. Over the winter, I requested more support from garden coordinators from the C & S Wholesale Grocers garden sites. In previous years, these sites required two visits a week, blocking out a lot of my time during the gleaning season for harvests that were typically smaller than those from commercial farms. Employee volunteers took over

these responsibilities in 2018, which was extremely helpful for our project. However, their volunteer hours were not counted for our records. A college student named Emma contacted me early in the season and offered to help with gleaning on a regular basis. After talking with her, we settled on having her do regular gleaning pick-ups at the Keene Farmer's Market over the summer, which was a significant contribution to our project. In all, volunteers donated about 200 hours of direct service to the gleaning project in 2018, not counting the many, many volunteer hours undertaken in our six charitable gardens.

STORIES

Squirrel-pocolyps

Not all gleaning stories are ringing successes. This year, I reached out the three apple orchards that have hosted gleans in the past, knowing that the season had been tough for fruit trees in the region, so yields of "extras" could be low. Indeed, two of them informed me that they did not have enough apples for gleaning this year. The owner of the third orchard, who no longer runs a commercial program on her

property, scheduled me to glean on October 3rd. On the day of the glean, I was preparing my boxes a half hour before I was scheduled to start the glean when the orchard owner called me to say there were no apples left to glean: a family of four bears had eaten them all! She had warned me previously that bears had been in the orchard gorging themselves on so many apples that they were throwing up. However, she had not checked the trees in a few days, so when she went out to check ahead of our scheduled glean, she found that they had managed to clear every last apple off of more than a thousand trees!

This was an episode in a larger story in our region, which came to be known as “squirrel-pocolyps.” The story begins in 2017 when many tree species in the region produced a “mast year,” overloading the food chain with so many nuts and seeds that many animals, especially rodents, produced and raised more than one litter of young. All of these hungry young animals found the forest buffet empty in 2018 and were forced to explore human habitats in search of food. As a result, the region saw a sad spike in road kills, desperate rodents were observed swimming across rivers, and many crops were found devastated in the fields. Green Wagon Farm in Keene shared a photo on social media of their corn crop after it had been visited by such hungry squirrels (seen here). Despite these challenges, farmers are resilient and meet their challenges as best they can. Green Wagon lost an entire field of corn, and ultimately ended their farm stand season a few weeks earlier than usual. But they also managed to sell plenty of delicious corn along with a beautiful variety of other fruits and veggies, and they donated 2,000 pounds MORE to The Community Kitchen in 2018 compared to 2017 (the bulk of this was cucumbers, summer squash, and zucchini).



Layered partnerships

A set of new partnerships developed within the gleaning project through a series of conversations in the winter of 2018. I ran in to the nutritionist from the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program at the Seed Celebration in February. She said she was interested in whether she might be able to share fresh local produce from gleaning with the moms who attend her WIC nutrition clinic. She said she could imagine a great pairing between the one-on-one counseling that WIC was offering to moms and offering them fresh produce to work with as they left the clinic. Later in the winter, I spoke with the produce manager at Nye Hill Farm, who mentioned that the farm intended to grow a dedicated plot for The Community Kitchen that year, and they had a special interest in ensuring that these efforts would address childhood hunger. After a little trial and error, we set up a system of preparing four banana boxes of produce for WIC at the end of each week, ensuring that they included the types of fruits and vegetables that were easiest to offer at WIC, as well as the produce delivered by Nye Hill Farm. On Mondays, an intern from the Cheshire County Conservation District would collect the labeled boxes and deliver them to WIC. This project was received enthusiastically at WIC and we will continue it in 2018.

Volunteering extra credit

Monadnock Time Exchange (MTX) is a local “time bank” or “time trading” system. Participants use a website to offer their time to fellow members of the community, and to find help with chores for themselves. One participant may advertise their availability to do house cleaning, pet sitting, and yard work, while another offers to do sewing, foreign language training, and copy editing. In this system, value is measured in time (hours), so an hour of pet sitting is equal to an hour of copy editing. MTX chose the gleaning program to experiment with the idea of



offering community service – volunteering – and earning hours in exchange. In this arrangement, The Community Kitchen was not expected to “pay back” hours that volunteers gave to the gleaning project, this was the organization’s service to the community. However, members of MTX who gave volunteer hours to the gleaning project logged those hours on the website, therefore “earning” hours of service from other members on the site. MTX announced the gleaning opportunities through their newsletter and social media. We saw three new volunteers through MTX in 2018 and they offered about 10 hours of time to the gleaning project.

LESSONS & 2018 PRIORITIES

As always, 2018 has reminded me that organization, consistency and persistence, and excellent communication are keys to success in this work. I still have plenty of work to do to make it easier and more compelling for volunteers and producers to engage with gleaning. In 2018 I plan to focus on a few key areas.

- 1) During the winter and spring of 2019, I will work with our Marketing Intern from Keene State College to develop a communication plan and implement it. This will include initiating the use of our blog, better use of social media, and strategic use of public speaking engagements, press releases, and participation in public outreach events and forums. I will use these tools to step up my efforts at volunteer recruitment and appreciation.
- 2) In 2019, The Community Kitchen will be developing a stronger coalition with the region’s smaller pantries in order to ensure more efficient and effective operations as well as to access funding sources that are emphasizing “collective impact” measures in their future programs. I will use the opportunity to better assess and develop the reach of gleaning to the smaller pantries in 2019 and work on increasing the participation of producers in some of the smaller towns in the gleaning project.
- 3) This will be the year to try dedicating specific days of the week to specific regions of the county and organizing regular gleans on those farms each week. This will require careful planning and organization ahead of the season, securing agreements with producers, recruiting dedicated volunteers, and planning how and where these gleanings will be distributed.
- 4) This will also be the year to experiment with cucumber, summer squash, and zucchini preservation. This, too, will take planning long in advance of the season, establishing dates, locations, volunteers, and methods to capture these crops and hold them over to a later season.