

Urban Gleaning in Lex

Dr. John Walker's herb'n guerrilla efforts feed the hungry in the Bluegrass

By Dave Overton

If you could end hunger in Lexington by giving up just a few hours of your own time, would you? If it meant just picking some food that would otherwise just go to waste, would you? By yourself, a few hours isn't that much. But, when combined with the hours of hundreds of other committed people, it could be the answer to feeding the hungry not only in Lexington, but throughout the world.

So where would the food come from?

John Walker, a biologist at the University of Kentucky, believes that it should come from gleaning, the use of food that would otherwise be wasted or unused. To help fight hunger in Lexington, he has formed the Lexington Urban Gleaning Network (LUGN), a loose association or network of people who have agreed to glean leftover or unused food and pass it along to agencies who will then distribute it.

Walker jokes that he got on the wrong plane and ended up at UK instead of THE UK. He moved to Lexington in 1993 after getting his Ph.D. in Great Britain, and relocated to his current residence in 1994 so he could grow a garden.

After reading an article in Common Dreams (www.commondreams.org), Walker started a local chapter of Kitchen Gardeners International called **Kitchen Gardeners of the Bluegrass**. Kitchen Gardeners encourages people to grow their own food. Believing that more education was needed to help urban dwellers with their gardens, Walker started the "Edible Garden" series, held at the UK Arboretum for a year. The series included lessons on such topics as seed starting, fall crops, and seed saving and swapping.

Last August, Walker read another article in Common Dreams about groups on the West Coast who collected fruit and donated it to the hungry.

After contacting North Berkeley Harvest, Walker collected 300 to 400 pounds of apples and pears from friends, which he then donated to the Hope Center, Mission Shelter, and the Primate Rescue Center.

When he contacted God's Pantry, they told him that nothing was happening in Lexington regarding gleaning. He then volunteered to set up a gleaning effort and formed LUGN.

He then joined with the Society of St. Andrew, a nationwide gleaning organization who lends their name, image, and respect to the LUGN efforts.

The primary goal of LUGN is to collect excess or unharvested food to feed Lexington families in need. Additionally, LUGN believes that working together to help others will build a sense of community and lower barriers in urban neighborhoods.

Traditionally, gleaning is gathering grain or other crops that are left unharvested by farmers. In an urban setting, however, gleaning takes on a different meaning. LUGN is currently concentrating on two types of gleaning: Picking unused fruit from neighborhood fruit trees and



planting extra food crops in backyard or community gardens to be donated to feed the hungry.

If you have fruit trees, or have neighbors who have fruit trees and don't harvest the fruit, LUGN would like you all to pick the fruit or organize your neighbors to gather fruit and deliver it to God's Pantry Food Bank or another emergency food agency. You can leave your neighbors a postcard that LUGN will provide requesting info about gleaning. Harvest only fruit that is of a quality that you would eat or process for yourself. (If fruit is small or bruised, it may be donated to animal shelters, such as the Primate Rescue Center, or a thoroughbred retirement center.)

Contact the local emergency food agency of your choice to arrange to deliver the food. If the amount is small, you may wish to coordinate your efforts with other groups or neighbors to arrange to deliver larger amounts of fruit at a time.

Walker emphasizes that the gleaning should be a neighborhood effort. He believes that working together with your neighbors to help feed the hungry can be a great community builder.

There are also other ways you can help gather unused food. If you know neighbors who will be taking a vacation, leaving their garden unharvested, ask if you can harvest their ripe produce while they are away and donate it to the hungry. Volunteer to donate their excess. You can also approach local grocery stores or restaurants about donating excess food that isn't sold (many large supermarkets have policies that prohibit donating their wasted food, but ask around). If you receive more food than you can use from a CSA membership, you can donate that to an agency. Ask the CSA if they are currently participating in Gleaning.

Walker says the largest challenge facing LUGN is raising awareness that food is going to waste and creating an organization and a system for people to get involved.

More volunteers are needed, not only to gather produce, but to share ideas, do legwork and phone work and identify agencies, shelters and their needs. Walker also invites participation from anyone who would like to start other gleaning initiatives such as farm gleaning.

The USDA estimates that 20 percent of all food grown in this country is wasted. Using this food, all the hungry in this country could be fed. Look around your neighborhood. How many trees have you seen where the fruit lies rotting on the ground. How much food goes unused. Do you have a few hours to help? ■

For info and to volunteer, email Dr. Walker at igrowfood@insightbb.com.

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