



SPORTS:
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Ian O'Connor, S-1




LOCAL:
How you can donate extra food from your garden to those who need it most. **L-1**



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Casualties Train crash

...smashed into the rear of Washington's Monday train, killing at least six people and injuring others. The trailing train jack-knifed and fell atop the first train, which was ripped apart. Crews had to dig out survivors. Rescue workers are still searching for survivors up to the upper

'It's definitely an addiction'

Free betting sites soar in popularity, but will they turn teens to gambling?

Local gardeners give to needy

Those with an ample harvest donate extras to food pantries



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Gary Oppenheimer, who runs the West Milford Community Garden, started AmpleHarvest, a nationwide effort to provide food to pantries.

By **BARBARA WILLIAMS**
STAFF WRITER

WEST MILFORD – It began with a local idea that those excess zucchinis and eggplants often left to rot in backyard gardens could fill a lot of otherwise-empty dinner plates.

And in only a year, that practical idea has morphed into a na-

tional movement on the Internet: With a few computer clicks, gardeners who find they've grown more than they want can now locate local food pantries and donate their produce to families in need.

They can do so through West Milford-born ampleharvest.org. Only a month after going national, the Web site has attracted

signups by more than 200 pantries across the country eagerly waiting for gardeners to bring in those extra beans, tomatoes or anything else grown locally.

Resident Gary Oppenheimer first had the idea for Ample Harvest, the initial local program that entailed packing up extra veggies

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Fast facts

- Americans waste an estimated 27 percent of all food, which equals about a pound of food every day per person.
- Waste occurs in restaurants, supermarkets and homes.
- Nearly 30 million tons of food are wasted annually, or enough to fill the Rose Bowl every three days.
- Wasted food costs Americans more than \$100 billion annually.

Garden

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grown in the West Milford Community Garden off Union Valley Road and bringing them to area pantries and shelters. Then he thought globally and started AmpleHarvest.org.

"People rarely get what they expect from their gardens — they either get way too much or not enough," Oppenheimer said. "So for those who get more than they expect, it's a way to reach into their back yards instead of their back pockets to help people who never get fresh fruit or vegetables."

Response to the program has been swift and strong. In North Jersey, the food pantry sponsored by St. Mary's Church in Pompton Lakes and the Englewood-based Center for Food Action, with eight locations in the counties of Bergen and Passaic, are on board.

Outside support has also been generous. Oppenheimer said Google has given the effort a grant for free advertising worth more than \$100,000 over the next year. Google Maps also is providing directions to any participating pantry.

Additionally, a number of organizations such as Garden Writers of America on LinkedIn, National Catholic Rural Life Bulletin, The Accidental Gardener, United Church of Christ, VFW, Atlanta Gardening Examiner and others are alerting their members to the program.

Two volunteer Web designers, one in Missouri and one in Wayne, have made the process simple: Pantries sign up on AmpleHarvest.org by filling out an online form with the address and hours. They are then added to a list of pantries in the area.

When a gardener logs on and puts in a ZIP code, a list of pantries serving that area drops down. A simple click on the pantry can bring up a map or directions, a phone number and the pantry hours. Gardeners then call the pantry and arrange a time to drop off the goods.

The generosity of gardeners is critical to the program, and it's apparently received a strong response in North Jersey.

One of them, Georgia Steward of West Milford said that "last year, I had so many vegetables I was begging people to take them."

Cultivating a plot in the local community garden, she added. "I think this a great idea, and now I'll know what to do with the extras."

Timing is one hitch that pantry organizers must cope with in successfully implementing the program: To avoid losing items to spoilage, produce dropoffs by donors and pickups by clients must be arranged within just a day or so.

"Signing up is the easy part," said Irwin Bogelman of the Center for Food Action. "But we have to work out the logistics. People have to understand they need to drop off the vegetables — we can't drive around to pick up five tomatoes."



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Anne Thornton, owner of the land that is home to the West Milford Community Garden, getting a hug from volunteer gardener Dave Watson-Hallowell.

Many gardeners may wonder if it's worth bringing in just a few items. But those involved with getting fresh produce to the needy say those couple of peppers, bunches of spinach and occasional celery stalks make a huge difference in the diet of a family hit by hard times.

"It is important to bring in just a few items — they add up, and this is a great way to connect the people who have too much with those that need it," said Colleen Duerr, vice president of America's Grow A Row in Pittstown. "It's a fairly simple concept that can eventually almost run itself."

Duerr knows of what she speaks: Her organization donated 225,000 pounds of fresh produce in 2008 through collecting small amounts of produce from a number of areas that included actually harvesting items — with the owners' permission — left on plants by farmers. Duerr said what is left behind may be smaller or not as nutri-

ty, but the taste is the same and just as nutritious.

Out in Minnesota, Tony Mans, director of Food Sourcing for Second Harvest Heartland, said its programs "have had quite a bit of interest here from local gardeners. We have been trying to find a good way to communicate to gardeners which food shelves they can donate to. I think ampleharvest.org is the missing link we have been looking for."

By comparison to some other regions in the nation, North Jersey's backyard growing season is short. But pantry organizers are hoping that at least for those few months, donations will flow in. Ray Keating, director of the pantry at St. Mary's, said it's "always looking for anything that helps bring in food."

"It might not be the answer to all our problems," Keating said, "but it might get fresh produce to some families that would otherwise not have any."

Making pantries aware of the program also is a work in progress. There is no national data base for food pantries. Most aren't listed in phone books or online and many are run by churches and not advertised, so the project is basically relying on word of mouth and Internet tools such as Twitter.

Those involved in spreading the word believe the program's visible success will help. It may just take some time.

Anne Thornton, the West Milford woman who allows volunteers to use a half-acre of her property for the community garden, said the time is right for AmpleHarvest to catch on.

"In this economy, so many new food pantries have just sprung up, and people are trying to figure out how to feed their families and how to live their lives," Thornton said. "This helps shift the focus back to basics."

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