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He helps gardeners find food bank for their bounty

Gary Oppenheimer hates waste.

And he loves gardening.

How all this turned into a nationwide effort to fight hunger is a fable for our time.

It was a few years ago. Someone with Oppenheimer's community garden was lamenting all the unharvested food at the end of the season.

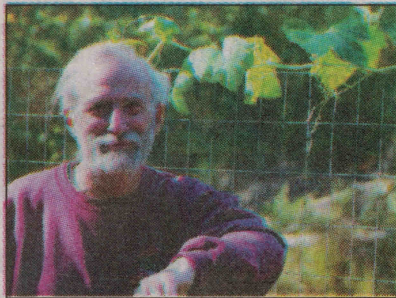
"If we're going to have an ample harvest, the least



Sandy Bauers

GreenSpace

we can do is donate it to people in the community who need it," said Oppenheimer, who lives in North



Gary Oppenheimer, who hates waste, founded AmpleHarvest.org.

Jersey's Passaic County.

So, naturally, he took on the task of finding a food pantry. No luck. It dawned on him that if he couldn't find food pantries, neither could

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Helping gardeners find food banks

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others.

Remembering the words he'd used — *ample harvest* — the self-professed geek and problem solver checked to see if they existed as an Internet domain name. Nope. So he paid \$9 to register www.AmpleHarvest.org.

"Remember, I hate waste," he said. And \$9 is \$9. "So now I was into it."

He had a mental picture of a kind of Google for food pantries. He put together a model, and the website launched in May of 2009.

There's lots of information on it, but the operative part is that food pantries can register and let people know where they are and what their donation hours are. Gardeners can enter their zip codes and come up with a list of pantries that might need their goodies.

Oppenheimer started calling regional food banks and faith communities to promote it. People liked the idea and wanted in, he said.

Along the way, Michelle Obama mentioned AmpleHarvest.org in a speech. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency lists it on a page that encourages us to "feed people — not landfills."

Oppenheimer began to rack up awards, and he got a \$40,000 annual advertising grant from Google.

It galls Oppenheimer that one in six people in the United States need food assistance, and can't get fresh produce. Most of what they get is processed, canned food that can be stored a long time.

"So the food-bank system is feeding people," Oppenheimer said, but not as well as it might. "The opposite of hunger isn't full, it's healthy."

Meanwhile, millions of gardeners wind up with excess and beg friends to take it.

The typical grower harvests 300 pounds of food a year, Oppenheimer said. "There's a lot of room in there to say, 'screw those tomatoes, I have too much already,' and throw them in the compost pile."

Better that, anyway, than the trash, where the food not only is wasted, but also adds to a fiscally and environmentally expensive waste stream.

Meanwhile, the grower may have a laid-off neighbor who is going to a food pantry.

Oppenheimer swears that, in the South, people lock their cars not to keep them from being stolen, but because the drivers are afraid that people will leave zucchinis in them.

I can almost believe it. Last year, my two dozen tomato plants produced 350 pounds of tomatoes — before we stopped weighing. We pre-

served what we couldn't eat.

But the 400-plus cucumbers were just too much. We didn't know about AmpleHarvest.org then and wondered if the local food pantry would want some. It did.

A Good Samaritan law protects gardeners if someone eats their food and, for some innocent reason, gets sick. As for intentional contamination, the world is full of creeps, but really ...

At the end of 2011, Oppenheimer surveyed pantries and concluded that more than 20 million pounds of produce had entered the food system as a result of his site.

In the best-case scenarios, pantries have morning donation hours for gardeners and afternoon hours for clients. In just a day, veggies can make it all the way to the dinner table.

I made spot calls to some of the dozens of pantries AmpleHarvest.org lists in this region. Alas, very few receive produce from gardeners. But, boy, would they like to!

"Everything is canned; nothing is fresh," said Sheena Alderfer, manager at Royersford's Open Door Food Pantry. When they get produce, "it's definitely a treat."

Clients at the Camden food pantry FLOCCK appreciate whatever they get, "but to have that variety and to supplement their diets with fresh

produce would be tremendous," said executive director Tasha Haslon.

The Phoenixville Area Community Services pantry gets some produce from gardeners, said executive director Carol Berger. Even when it's just a small amount of tomatoes or greens, "trust me, everything that comes in, people are grateful for it."

Meanwhile, with a budget of \$528,000 a year, Oppenheimer is charging ahead.

AmpleHarvest.org now has Android and iPhone apps.

He's working on a concept for assigning a nutritional value to each food item so he can assess how many vitamins and minerals are being donated rather than how many pounds.

He's also working on a website to link farmers who can't harvest all their food with gleaners — people who go into, say, a potato field to pick up the spuds that the harvesting equipment missed.

And to think it all stemmed from concern about one gardener's waste. To Oppenheimer, "The big vision is, simply, no food left behind."

"GreenSpace" appears every other week, alternating with Art Carey's "Well Being" column. Contact Sandy Bauers at 215-854-5147, sbauers@phillynews.com or @sbauers on Twitter. Visit her blog at www.philly.com/greenspace.