



Getting a Head: Local volunteers gather escarole outside Salinas. AAH donates millions of pounds of produce annually.— *Zachary Stahl*

## Quite a Pick

**Ag Against Hunger harvests left-behind crops for those who need it most.**

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By Zachary Stahl

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The warm morning sun glows in the cloudless sky, illuminating bright green ag fields that stretch to the base of the sublime mountains outside San Juan Bautista. A friend and I put on gloves and sunscreen and join a crowd of about 15 volunteers wearing hairnets and sun hats. We glance at the rows of red-veined, green leaves—a plot of beets that harvesters passed up because they are selling at a low price and cannot be harvested economically.

Instead of the beets getting plowed under, Ag Against Hunger is going to “glean” the field and provide the crops to local food banks. (Ag Against Hunger also collects edible leftovers that do not meet commercial standards.) Jeff Jones, president of the Salinas-based nonprofit, gives the volunteers—a few of them teens who would rather be sleeping—some encouragement, saying the crops will go to low-income locals who struggle to put food on the table, let alone fresh veggies. “All the produce that we are getting here,” he says, “is going to people who don’t get produce.”

With yellow-handled knives in hand, the volunteers kneel or sit in the moist soil and start tugging. The first dirt-covered bulbs I find are too small, so I keep digging, occasionally scoring a beet big enough to toss in my box.

A row over from me, a family from Salinas adds their own wrinkle to the unique harvest: The four members of the Provost family challenge one another to see who can pull out the biggest bulb. The youngest daughter, with a couple of baseball-sized beets, appears to have won.

After about 10 minutes a couple walks the first boxes of bounty over to the loading truck, where two men dump the bulbs into giant cardboard boxes. With mild shame, I realize I’ve only collected a handful of beets.

It turns out the couple has gleaned before. I further comfort myself with the knowledge that harvesting goes a lot faster with two people.

But I’m not the only one who is a little slow to crop picking. “I couldn’t imagine doing this 12 hours a

day,” one woman says after about a half hour in the sun. Good point. If we were picking crops for an agricultural company, it wouldn’t be at a leisurely, backyard-gardening pace, but under the pressure of the clock and quotas.

I manage to fill two boxes in an hour—and get my jeans caked in dirt. I would never make it as a beet picker.

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Next we caravan past a few goats and a llama, parking by a plot of escarole lettuce only halfway harvested because because crews moved onto a fresher crop and now the lettuce is a touch too wilted for choosy shoppers.

The light green lettuce heads look flowery and enticing—especially compared to the buried beets. Eraclio Duenas of Coke Farms skillfully slices out a head from the soil and in two quick cuts peels off the first layer of escarole.

I try to mimic his precision but end up cutting the head too high, scattering the leaves. So instead I pull the whole root out of the ground and then chip away. Tiny spiders crawl out of the soil. The escarole makes me want to go back to the beets.

After 45 minutes, I drop off my second box of lettuce, and the coordinator tells me to pick what I want to take home and call it a day.

Even though we were a little slow—or at least I was—we still glean 1,200 pounds of produce in a morning. It’s part of an impressive overall push: Last year Ag Against Hunger volunteers harvested more than 55,000 pounds, which it adds to the surplus donations received through a collaboration with tri-county growers and shippers. Once local food banks have had their fill, the produce is shipped to states such as Arizona, Washington and Colorado, feeding the needy throughout the West Coast. All told, AAH donates 10 million pounds of fruits and vegetables a year.

On this day, the harvest isn’t limited to produce: the gleaning changes volunteers’ perspective of field work.

Jeremy Provost, a senior at Salinas High School, participated in the gleaning as part of his community service hours. He says he has quickly learned to appreciate where his produce comes from. “It shows us what other people have to do day by day,” he says, “to supply everyone else with vegetables.”

Linda Provost looks on knowingly. She wanted Jeremy and her two daughters to experience field work so they would not take it for granted. She personally picked lettuce as a teenager.

For volunteers Alicia Urueta and her son Steven, it was the first time in the fields. But it’s something neither of them will soon forget. “I think it will make me think a little bit more,” Alicia says, “the next time I take a bite of salad.”

**THIS MONTH’S AG AGAINST HUNGER GLEANINGS ARE AUG. 11 AND AUG. 25. CALL 755-1480 TO RSVP. [AGAGAINSTHUNGER.ORG](http://AGAGAINSTHUNGER.ORG).**

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