

Columnists

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Gleaning urban fruit turns food waste green

Those fruit trees in our backyards can be a fabulous source of fresh, healthful food for family, friends or food banks. But without hard work and a plan, just one tree might instead produce hundreds of pounds of rotted, wasted fruit.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Waste is persistent. If we want to turn waste into resources, we need to outsmart and outwork waste, even when we're dealing with something as simple as a piece of fruit.

Those fruit trees in our backyards can be a fabulous source of fresh, healthful food for family, friends or food banks. But without hard work and a plan, just one tree might instead produce hundreds of pounds of rotted, wasted fruit.

In the past 10 years, the gleaning movement has blossomed in the Northwest. Gleaning means picking a crop, especially the part of a crop that might previously have gone to waste.

Urban fruit-tree gleaning programs organize volunteers to harvest trees when property owners can't do it. Because of the logistical and physical challenges of gleaning, these nonprofit gleaning programs need ongoing support from the community, just like fruit trees themselves need nurturing.

Q: Why go to so much trouble just to harvest fruit trees?

A: Americans need to waste less food. Forty percent of food overall in the U.S. goes uneaten, according to a new Natural Resources Defense Council report. Production, transportation and disposal of all that wasted food take an enormous environmental toll. Meanwhile, people who need food go hungry.

As consumers, we can take various steps to reduce food waste, such as changing purchasing habits and using leftovers creatively. But home fruit trees provide us with a seasonal opportunity to branch out.

The need is growing. City Fruit, a local nonprofit that promotes cultivation and harvesting of urban fruit, maintains a list (seati.ms/RNCYoo) of more than 50 Seattle food banks, shelters and other organizations seeking donations of fruit.

Q: What kind of fruit do gleaning programs and recipient organizations want?

A: Whether you use a gleaning program or harvest fruit yourself, donated fruit should be pesticide-free and should not be diseased, infested or damaged. Fruit on the ground should not be donated, since it is more likely to have harmful bacteria.

Apples, pears, Asian pears, plums and figs are usually in demand locally, and other fruit may also

be accepted. Call organizations before you donate to make sure they can use your fruit.

Q: Isn't composting another good way to reduce fruit waste?

A: Definitely, but first make sure edible fruit gets eaten. Fallen, damaged or rotten fruit should be put in your residential yard-waste collection cart for composting.

Q: If I want someone to pick my fruit, or want to volunteer as a picker, how do I find a gleaning program?

A: The CityFruit website is a great place to start. It also includes contact information for other area gleaning programs, such as Solid Ground's Community Fruit Tree Harvest and Colman Neighborhood Harvest in Seattle, and Thurston County Food Bank Gleaners in Olympia. You can also call Seattle Tilth's Garden Hotline at [206-633-0224](tel:206-633-0224) to find gleaners in your community.

Gleaning programs cannot accept all requests for picking. Although most gleaning programs don't charge a fee to homeowners, consider making a financial donation or helping with the harvest.

Q: What are other ways of using gleaned fruit?

A: Rather than donating all their picked fruit, gleaning programs may distribute part of it to volunteer pickers or the property owners, or even sell some to restaurants to support their programs. Some fruit may be made into cider or jam and then donated.

Q: Can you share a vision of gleaning in the Northwest in the future?

A: More fruit trees will be planted, on private property and on institutional and public grounds such as school campuses and parks. These trees will be organically grown and well-tended. Very little edible fruit will go to waste because conscientious property owners and gleaning programs will make sure it all gets harvested.

For the present, this is apple and pear season, so let's get picking! Johnny Appleseed was right: Fruit is a valuable natural resource.

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