Making use of vegetables unsalable but still edible.

Farm leftovers for the needy

By Natalie Pompilio

INQUIRER CORRESPONDENT

JACOBSTOWN — Knee-deep in dying string bean plants, Mary Prioleau plucked away yesterday, searching through brown and green leaves for the salvageable beans.

"We have people in this country going to bed with an empty stomach," Prioleau said. "It shouldn't be when we have all this waste."

Prioleau was collecting the remainders of the latest harvest at Robson's Farm, gathering the edible, but not salable, vegetables. The food then was given to soup kitchens and needy families throughout South Jersey through a new program called New Jersey Farmers Against Hunger.

Yesterday's harvest marked World Food Day, an effort by the United Nations to increase awareness of hunger and malnutrition.

Since the farmers' program began in the summer, it has distributed more than 230,000 pounds of produce throughout South Jersey.

Once, these remainders were thrown on a compost pile or plowed under to make room for new crops. But the New Jersey Agricultural Society, which received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, joined with a group of farmers and decided to make good use of the unsold fruits and vegetables.

"There's a lot of good Jersey fresh vegetables for you to consume," said state Agriculture Secretary Art Brown Jr. as he ate one raw string bean and picked a few others at Robson's.

In New Jersey, 300,000 children under age 12 are estimated to be hungry or in danger of hunger from one day to the next, Brown said.

About 17 states participate in similar programs, Brown said, many of them getting a start this year with money from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In states with a year-round growing season, like California, the program follows suit.

Farmer Neil Robson, 38, whose father first plowed these Burlington County fields in 1930, said he didn't know of any farmer who wouldn't be willing to be part of the program. Farmers only need allow program volunteers to glean their fields so that the program is no cost to them.

"So much is lost each year," Robson said. Last year, for example, "we must have cut up enough eggplant and red See FOOD on B10

A basket of green beans sits in a field at Robson's Farm as members of a church fan out for picking.
Katie Robinson helps pick green beans on Robson’s Farm. She was with others from Saint’s Memorial Community Church, Willingboro.

N.J. farm leftovers picked for the hungry

FOOD from B1 peppers to feed Philadelphia for the winter,” he said.

About 15 farmers have contributed to the program on a weekly basis this summer. There are about 1,900 produce farms in the state.

Robson said his family ate its own vegetables, including the ones that markets would refuse to sell.

“It doesn’t faze me,” Robson said, “but generally people demand blemish-free food, and we’re under the gun to get as much of that as we can.”

Another deciding factor in what goes to waste and what doesn’t is the market. If tomatoes are flooding the shelves and the price bottoms out, farmers may be more likely to harvest something else.

The amount of unsalable food a farm has depends on the weather. Last year, for example, a dry summer left everything “picture perfect,” Robson said, about 90 to 95 percent yield.

This year, the amount of salable produce averaged 75 percent, he said.

Prioletu, who organizes food distribution for Saint’s Memorial Community Church, in Willingboro, said that when the produce trucks arrive, everyone available runs to help unload them.

Yesterday, members of Prioletu’s congregation helped her gather vegetables. She said she would like to organize a program so that the people who are benefiting from the program are the ones who help harvest it.

“People don’t mind helping. They just need some guidance,” Prioletu said.

Prioletu said she makes sure the neediest people are fed, particularly the elderly.

“A lot of the time, people are too proud to take handouts,” Prioletu said. “I say, ‘It’s not a handout. It’s a gift from God.’”