Needy enjoy the fruits of farm group's labor

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"Gleaning" goes back at least as far as the Bible, in which growers are admonished to set aside a portion of their harvest for the poor.

For the past decade, a group called Farmers Against Hunger has been carrying out the ancient practice in New Jersey, linking farmers with volunteers to make sure surplus fruits and vegetables do not go to waste.

Friday, the group was busy harvesting at Longmeadow Farm, in a village called Hope, in North Jersey.

The day before members were in northern Burlington County, picking apples at the Strawberry Hill Farm in Chesterfield in the morning, and peppers, eggplant and tomatoes later in the day in a vegetable plot in Florence farmed by Jean and Fritz Wainwright.

"The great thing about Thursday," said Judy Grignon, the director of the program, is that the produce we picked in the morning was on someone's plate by that night."

About 1,500 pounds of apples and a similar amount of eggplant, peppers and tomatoes were trucked to a church in Trenton that afternoon and distributed to church groups, food pantries and other agencies from the city and surrounding area.

Fresh produce is among the most expensive items to put on the table, even as it is one of the most vital.

And these days it is not just the poor who are finding it difficult to eat well.

"It's getting to the point..." See HARVEST, Page 4B

Two Pennington School students pick crops at Wainwrights' field in Florence last week in support of Farmers Against Hunger.
where our client is,” Grignon said. “All our agencies tell me that they are getting people in their food lines who have never before joined any such thing. These people have jobs, cars and homes. But the cost of everything has skyrocketed, while their salaries have remained static or even declined, and fresh food is no longer within their financial reach.”

About 50 farmers from around the state participate in the program, which is coordinated by the New Jersey Agricultural Society.

In any given year, the program delivers about 1.5 million pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables to an estimated 7,000 recipients, working through more than 200 community food organizations.

Some of the surplus is what’s left in the fields after mechanical harvest, some is purposefully planted with the needy in mind, some is just the result of an unexpected abundance.

Grignon recruits volunteers from churches, schools and civic groups to conduct the harvests, and has turned to the state Department of Corrections for help on more than one occasion.

“They’re not farmers, for the most part, but they come in very handy, particularly when I get a last-minute call from a farmer,” Grignon said of the inmates.

On Thursday, a group of youths from the Hightstown Presbyterian Church picked apples at Strawberry Hill while students from the Pennington School traveled to the Wainwrights’ field in Florence.

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Judy Grignon, about turning to the state Department of Corrections

we had a day off (Thursday, for Yom Kippur),” Chuck Oblentz, the chaplain at the school said. “I put up a sign-up sheet and about 10 kids signed up. All boarding students. All international students, actually, from Korea and other countries.”

The picking took under two hours, Oblentz said.

“We talk a lot at school about doing something important for others,” the chaplain said. “This turned out to be important for them too.”

Founded by the Methodist church in 1838, Pennington, in Mercer County, is a private school for day and boarding students, grades six to 12.

Farmers Against Hunger runs on a budget of $150,000, which is used mainly for transportation and administration.

While it is busiest during times of harvest, the group manages to operate year round through agreements with trucking companies, warehouses and supermarkets that make surplus produce available to it, Grignon said.

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