A Caring Community

Produce destined to feed the hungry

Rutgers student Jessica Castoro picks collard greens during a harvest gleaning with faculty, staff and alumni volunteers from Rutgers’ School of Environmental and Biological Sciences at Giamarese Farm in East Brunswick. KATHY JOHNSON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

EAST BRUNSWICK — Almost two dozen volunteers got down and dirty Wednesday at Giamarese Farm as they picked lush leaves of collard greens and filled numerous bags destined for the Franklin Township Food Bank and other area charitable organizations.

“I think it’s awesome to be able to donate all this to food banks and other places so others will be able to eat,” said Rutgers University senior Jessica Castoro, 21, who, along with several of her classmates under the tutelage of professor Jack Rabin, participated in the event. “It’s also a lot of fun.”

Organized by the Rutgers’ School of Environmental and Biological Sciences in cooperation with Farmers Against Hunger and Rutgers Against Hunger, the late-harvest gleaning is an annual event at the farm.

Gleaning is a time-honored tradition in which farmers leave a portion of their crops in the field for the poor and hungry.

“We were looking for a charitable activity we could do in the fall,” said Diana M. Orban Brown, direc-

FOR MORE INFO

Additional information about Farmers Against Hunger is available at njagsoociety.org/fah/index.htm. To donate produce, financial support or volunteer, contact Program Director Kris Guttadora at 609-462-9691, email farmersagainsthunger@gmail.com or like “NJ Farmers Against Hunger” on Facebook.

Additional information about Rutgers Against Hunger is available at rah.rutgers.edu or by calling 848-932-2460.

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or of the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences’ Office of Community Engagement. “I had read something about gleaning and started looking around. We knew Jim Giamarese and reached out to him.”

The first year the group visited the farm they collected buckets of peppers. Last year, the volunteers collected collard greens and apples.

“We filled the Farmers Against Hunger truck and still had about 17 bags of collard greens leftover,” Orban Brown said. “We put them in my car and dropped them off at Elijah’s Promise. The chef said she would wash them and freeze them and that they were going to be the highlight of the Thanksgiving feast they have every year. It was really a good feeling.”

Group links suppliers, agencies

Farmers Against Hunger was formed in 1996 as a nonprofit designed to link local farmers, grocery stores and produce suppliers with more than 60 emergency feeding organizations, soup kitchens and service organizations, as well as providing produce to the state’s food banks.

Giamarese, chairman of Farmers Against Hunger, said the idea was conceived after a group of legislators visited a farm and noticed some unpicked produce and took some home.

“We thought if the legislators saw a value in it, then we could find a way to get it to the needy,” he said. “And today, with the economy, the need is even greater today.”

“The fresh produce that we receive goes out to feed local organizations that are helping people with hunger issues,” said Kristina Gutadora, program director of Farmers Against Hunger. “It’s a great way to recover perfectly nutritious food that would have gone to waste.”

About 35 farms around the state donate produce each season to Farmers Against Hunger, she said.

Last year, Farmers Against Hunger collected a little more than 1 million pounds from grocery stores, wholesale produce companies and farms. About 430,000 pounds came directly from farms, she said.

The organization has four main distribution sites in Camden, Browns Mills, Mount Holly and Trenton. At each of those sites, 10 local churches help distribute the produce, Gutadora said. The organization also delivers to about 30 other organizations, including the state food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens, she added.

Universitywide effort started in ’08

Also at the event was Kat Decker, program director of Rutgers Against Hunger.

Rutgers Against Hunger was launched in 2008 as a universitywide effort involving food and fundraising drives and cooperative programs with farmers and gardeners to supply much-needed food to affiliates of the New Jersey Federation of Food Banks.

“Farm gleaning is a non-traditional opportunity to do something good for the community and learn something in the process,” Decker said. “Before doing this last year, I had no clue what a gleaning was. It’s a great program.”

Rabin, who brought students from his sustainable agriculture class to the farm, said that gleaning is an ancient right in the Bible, and he asked his students to think about gleaning in the modern world, where those who need the food might not be able to get to the fields.

“I use this as a learning experience for students,” he said. “It’s also a great way for the students to get out on the farms and learn what farmers do.”

Rutgers senior Heather Afford, 22, said it’s a wonderful opportunity to help others and is also a valuable learning experience.

“I grew up in Tabernacle, and there are a lot of farms there, but I never really visited a farm aside from pumpkin picking,” she said. “A lot of work goes on here. I’m really glad to be able to help with such a worthwhile cause.”

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