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By [Suzanne Savell](#)

## **Urban Food Gleaning, Portland Style**

John Campaine sorts food gleaned from New Seasons.

Portland is a city that prides itself on its abundant supply of fresh food. Whether it's being served in cafes, food carts, stocked on the shelves of grocers, grown on sidewalk garden plots or hanging from neighborhood trees, local and often organic produce is all around us. With all this food, it's hard to understand why Oregon consistently ranks as one of America's hungriest states.

In the 2008-09 year, The Oregon Food Bank (OFB) distributed a record 897,000 emergency boxes—a 14% increase from the prior year. In its efforts to feed Oregon's hungry, OFB saves tons of fresh food from going to landfills by recovering produce and perishable foods from grocers and food distributors. While OFB is able to save large quantities of food from the landfill, they do not have the resources to recover the city's overwhelming food surplus, which is spread across the city's markets, restaurants and neighborhood fruit trees. Each year 200,000 tons of wasted food from Portland's farmers markets, restaurants and grocery stores ends up in landfills.

Anyone working in hunger relief will attest that hunger is not a problem of scarce resources, but of inefficient distribution. Across Portland, a handful of individuals, organizations and businesses are coming up with creative ways to collect fresh food otherwise destined for landfills and distribute it to our city's ever-rising number of hungry people. While some call it food recovery and others dub it gleaning, these efforts, spread out across the city, are an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to fighting hunger and creating a more sustainable community.

### **Urban Gleaners**



*John Campaine driving to a pickup at New Seasons*

On a crisp September morning, I met up with John Campaine, driver for [Urban Gleaners](#), to get a sense of how urban gleaning works. A small volunteer-run organization that is partially funded by the sale of Tracy's Small-Batch Granola, Urban Gleaners picks up edible food from farmers markets, restaurants, grocery stores and event sites and delivers it to local agencies that feed the hungry.

We met in front of the Blachet House, where John picked up a few boxes of surplus melons to distribute to food pantries around town. A relief agency that provides meals to anywhere between 600 to 900 daily, Blanchet House works closely with Urban Gleaners to make use of rescued food by incorporating it into

their daily meals and distributing surplus donations to the greater community.

“What I’ve learned from all this,” says Campaine, “is there’s way too much bread and bananas in the world.”

In many ways, gleaning is a race against time. Once food is recovered, the first big challenge is figuring out where the food can be used before it goes bad. The next hurdle is figuring out how to get it there. Every pick-up has the potential for astonishment and presents a new challenge in terms of figuring out how to swiftly re-distribute mass quantities of perishable food.

“I’ve been doing this for two years,” says Campaine, “and I’m still amazed at the variety of the products and the quantity.”

One recent memorable pick-up was 200 gallons of Stanford’s salmon chowder that was left over after a charity race. Using their network of volunteers, Urban Gleaners was able to find a walk-in refrigerator where they could cool down the chowder and then divide it up into smaller quantities that they were able to distribute to the Blanchet House and to North Powellhurst School (through a partnership to feed low-income children and their families; see the [Oregonian’s September 2010 feature](#) for more about this partnership).



*Campaine gathers food from New Seasons.*

In addition to picking up food from multiple small markets, Urban Gleaners is able to rescue prepared foods because it is protected through the Good Samaritan laws, which protects food donors from liability on both a federal and state level. As a member of Feeding America’s national food bank, OFB is held to stricter accountability of what kinds of foods they can distribute through their network. As a volunteer-run grassroots organization, Urban Gleaners is more able to deal with all the logistics of transporting and storing prepared foods than the larger food rescue groups.

“It’s a win-win situation,” says Campaine. Caterers, convention center event organizers, farmers market vendors and grocers get a tax deduction and it saves them garbage and compost fees. Organizations like Blanchet House, Loaves and Fishes, and North Powellhurst School benefit by receiving fresh, local and organic foods to feed the hungry.

### **B-Line: Gleaning by Bike**



*B-Line Sustainable Delivery*

One of the biggest challenges of urban gleaning is the cost and labor required to distribute gleaned foods in a timely manner. The folks that work at [B-Line Sustainable Delivery](#) see first-hand the enormous amount of surplus food that goes to waste in Portland every day.

“There’s an abundance of perishable food available for donation from local grocers, farmers markets and restaurants on B-Line’s daily delivery routes,” says B-Line’s PR Manager Carolyn Holland, “These smaller vendors do not have the means to transport their surplus food, and the small parcel donations are not cost effective for Oregon’s larger food assistance networks to pick up.”

As a delivery company that works with a lot of grocers, farmers markets and cafes, B-Line decided that their pedal-powered delivery company was in a unique position to help. “B-Line is the missing link,” says Holland, “we are already making seven round trips a day through the downtown core delivering to grocers and restaurants: gleaning their surplus food as we deliver to them just makes sense.”

### **Coming Soon: B-Shares**





*B-Line delivers food to Sisters of the Road as part of its B-Shares program.*

B-Line just wrapped up a three-month pilot phase of B-Shares, a gleaning program that they plan to launch in late October or early November. They figured out that at a cost of \$20, their company was able to deliver 100 pounds or 130 meals worth of gleaned food.

Beginning this fall, they will launch the B-Share Program, in which B-Line clients and the public will be able to purchase \$20 B-Shares that will fund the gleaning and delivery program.

While B-Line is a for-profit company, B-Share funds will be used entirely for covering the cost of delivering gleaned foods to hunger relief agencies. "We're a small company and need to cover our labor costs," says Holland, "If B-Shares funding ever exceeds the cost of labor, it will be re-invested in the hunger relief organizations benefiting from the program.

As part of the three-month pilot project, B-Line reached out to their delivery clients and hunger relief organizations to figure out how they could best provide the distribution piece of the gleaning puzzle. They invited 25 people to participate as donors and established pick-up schedules with their clients and arranged to deliver the gleaned goods to Blanchet House, Sisters of the Road, and Saint Francis Dining Hall. They also got in touch with Urban Gleaners to see if they could help distribute foods, and took over two downtown delivery routes that freed up John Campaine for pick-ups and deliveries on the outskirts of town.



*Sammy Lawrence enjoys a meal containing gleaned food at Sisters of the Road Cafe.*

By leveraging its business model—small-scale bicycle delivery within Portland’s urban core—B-Line used this pilot project to develop a system for distributing gleaned food at a much lower cost to nonprofits and the environment.

“During the pilot we’ve found we can deliver donated food at a cost of \$.26 per meal,” says Holland, “while Sisters of the Road costs run close to \$1.00 per meal for food and transportation.”

They also joined the intricate network of collaborators involved in getting gleaned foods out to the hungry. “There’s no competition in solving hunger,” says Holland. When they come across an unexpectedly large donation, B-Line knows that they can turn to John Campaine and Urban Gleaners to figure out how to get the food to someone who can use it.

B-Shares will be publicly launched in late October or early November. Until then, the public is invited to view the [work-in-progress web site](#) and provide feedback.

### **Portland Fruit Tree Project**



*Kiwi fruit growing in Southeast Portland.*

Portland is a tree-loving city, and at certain times of the year, it's hard not to notice the abundance of fruit trees throughout our neighborhoods. This is yet another source of food that goes to waste in a city of plenty that is also a city of hungry.

The [Portland Fruit Tree Project](#) is a nonprofit that organizes people to gather fruit before it falls and makes it available to the city's hungry. Through harvesting parties organized in 2009, PFTP gleaned almost 15,000 pounds of fruit that otherwise would have ended up in rotten piles. They worked with over 250 volunteers to harvest fruit from 111 trees around the city. While the harvest parties are open to anyone, half the slots are reserved for low-income individuals. Half the harvested fruit is given to the volunteer gleaners and the other half is donated to local food pantries.

When more fruit is harvested than the pantries can use, PFTP brings it to the Oregon Food Bank to be distributed through their emergency food boxes. PFTP also works with community partners to arrange group harvesting parties with hunger relief organizations including Sisters of the Road Cafe, JOIN, Project Grow, and Impact NW and works with area businesses to organize benefit harvests. Individuals interested in having fruit trees harvested on their property can register their fruit trees with the PFTP. A full schedule of harvesting parties happening throughout September and October is posted on [PFTP's web site](#). You can also find out more by calling 503.284.6106.

### **Stolen Fruit: Gleaning Ethics 101**





*Elizabeth Johnson and her gleaned apricot tree.*

A few weeks ago, the apricots on Clint Gorthy and Elizabeth's Johnson's tree were just about ripe enough to pick. In the second year at their North Portland home, they were excited to harvest the fruit and make a stash of apricot jam to get them through winter and maybe even next year.

The tree really only produces fruit every other year, and during their first year in their home, they only got one or two apricots. Their neighbors and the previous homeowners had lauded all kinds of praises on the apricots from this tree, and this was the year that they would be able to enjoy the bountiful harvest. When Clint came home from work, he went out to the tree. "I was thinking I'd have a nice fresh apricot," Clint says, "because just that morning they'd been ripe and dropping to the ground." To his astonishment, he found that the tree was completely bare.

In the middle of the day, someone had gone into the narrow side yard between the driveway and their neighbors' driveway, climbed up a huge pile of mulch and taken every single apricot. "Honestly, I don't know how they got to the top of the tree," says Elizabeth. "They must of used a ladder."

Clint and Elizabeth were gleaned on the sly.

To this day, they still haven't figured out who took the fruit. Both Elizabeth and Clint are open to the possibility that whoever raided their apricot tree may have thought they were rescuing food that was going to waste, but "they should have asked," says Elizabeth, "and if we're not home, put a note on our door."

Clint thinks it would be even better if they'd asked ahead of time. On one hand, Clint admires the nomadic lifestyle that exists throughout Portland and how people creatively make use of the city's natural resources. "It's a tree, a part of the common good," he says, "but when someone has taken care of it and raised it in their yard, you should have a little respect and ask if you can share it with them."



*French toast made with gleaned Dave's Killer Bread at Sisters of the Road Cafe.*

**Urban Edibles**, a web-based community database of wild food sources, allows foragers and gleaners to map potential sources of wild edible food, including residential fruit trees. A page on this site is dedicated to the ethics of urban foraging and gleaning. Asking permission not only makes sure that you aren't stealing, it begins a dialogue with neighbors and helps build community around a food source. Another ethical consideration touched on is the amount of food you should harvest. It would have made all the difference in the world to Clint and Elizabeth had their stealthy gleaner left them even a few apricots. Now they'll have to wait another two years to make apricot jam.

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