



URBAN GLEANERS  
FOOD FOR ALL

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# GUIDE TO GLEANNING



# SO YOU WANT TO BE A GLEANER

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Perhaps you've heard that American consumers, businesses, and farms spend \$218 billion a year, or 1.3% of GDP, growing, processing, transporting, and disposing food that is never eaten. That's 52 million tons of food sent to landfills annually, plus another 10 million tons that is discarded or left unharvested on farms. Meanwhile, one in seven Americans is food insecure.

We understand the desire to *do something* about that—in fact, that heartfelt desire is behind everything we do, and we're so excited that more individuals and organizations are interested in reducing waste and want in their communities. At Urban Gleaners, we collect that delicious, fresh food before it can go to waste and we get it to people who need it. This guide serves as a starting point on your gleaning adventure to help you do the same—we'll share where we began, how we grew, and what it takes to collect and redistribute over 60,000 pounds of food every month as a full-scale gleaning organization.

We know that gleaning alone is not going to solve our hunger problem. There are serious systemic issues facing us: widespread poverty, social injustice, and income inequality are just the start of it. But we know that individuals *can* make a difference. Whether you're one person with a car and a dream or a full team ready to mobilize an army of hunger and food waste fighting volunteers, making a difference in your community is just a matter of getting started.

**We'll show you how.**



## Level One

# START HERE

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In 2006, our founder Tracy Oseran discovered that hunger is not necessarily an issue of supply, it is an issue of distribution. She and her two teenagers started talking to people in local restaurants, grocery stores, and bakeries, and brought food from those kitchens directly to a single nonprofit shelter, proving that one family with one car *can* make a difference. “Our first pickup was three Glad plastic containers from one of Portland’s fanciest restaurants,” Tracy recalls. “That’s how it started.” To be a single-family gleaning machine, simply:

1. **Find the need. Identify an organization or two that would be able to accept gleaned donations.** From women's shelters and houses of worship to organizations providing food and resources to people experiencing homelessness, there are plenty of places you can drop off gleaned food. Check to see if they have the ability to store food in a fridge, freezer, or a kitchen! Also, if you end up collecting some food that’s not fit for

human consumption, you can pair up with an animal sanctuary or farm that could use food scraps for animal feed.

2. **Identify a few businesses that may be willing to donate their unserved, unsold food.** Some good places to start: locally owned supermarkets or co-ops, neighborhood farmers markets, community gardens, pizza eateries, bakeries, and caterers. Look around your neighborhood: who might have wholesome, edible food left over, from fresh garden produce, unserved leftovers from events, and food which has passed its “best by” date but is still good. At this stage, you may want to focus on items that won’t make a mess in your car: Think fresh produce, packaged goods, grab-and-go items like sandwiches and prepared salads, dairy, or anything else that comes in its own container or peel.
3. **Reach out to potential donors.** Be persistent! You may need to return and ask several times to get those yeses. “I had to go back a million times, but I wasn’t going to let it go. You have to be okay with rejection,” says our founder, Tracy. Use a simple script: “Do you have left over food? What do you do with it? Could we take it off your hands?” It also helps to explain that you’ll make it easy for them, and that they would be protected by state and/or federal Good Samaritan laws that were designed both to encourage donation of needed foods and to protect donors from liability. (In other words, donors can’t be held responsible if the food they donate in good faith makes someone sick.)
4. **Set a schedule for regular pickups, and stick to it.** A regular schedule allows both donors and recipients to rely on you, so consistency is key. Bring along food-grade storage bins, gloves, and any necessary containers for picking up unsold food—plastic totes and milk crates are indispensable!
5. **Keep a journal of your gleans.** Tracking your donations allows you to keep track of which pick-ups are reliable and worth your time, which can use some support, and which might require you to recruit an additional volunteer or two. Keeping a journal of amounts and times of collection will also help you communicate the success of your efforts to both your donors and recipients!
6. **Optional, but recommended: get a food handler’s certificate.** Easy, affordable, and fast, getting your food handlers permit offers a chance to brush up on food safety to make sure donated goods get to their destination in the best possible shape.

This first-stage approach cuts out the middleman of storage, refrigeration, repacking food, and managing volunteers. We truly believe every community has the potential to reduce food waste and hunger via this kind of one-to-one, direct delivery gleaning. It also comes with another major benefit: You get to form relationships with people across the food chain, which is one of the best ways to boost your own happiness! Now that’s what we call a win/win/win.



## *Level Two*

# SCALE UP SMARTLY

After a while, chances are your friends, family, and community have started to take notice of your gleaning efforts. Maybe you've been able to recruit volunteers to help you accept new pick up and drop-off locations, or maybe you've got way more food to send out than you can do at one time. This is when you know it's time to level up and move into the next stage of your gleaning adventure.

1. **Continue distributing direct to community organizations.** Focus your growth efforts and resources on being able to accept more food, and leave the distribution to your nonprofit/community partners. Setting up your own mobile markets and food pantries will come in Level Three, page 7.

2. **Grow your gleaning team.** Work with friends and volunteers to create a living document of pick-up and drop-off times to keep things organized. We recommend using a shared calendar or document (like Google Sheets) to make sure everyone has access to updates to the schedule.
3. **Find a space.** A designated gleaning space—like a retrofitted garage, spare room in a community center, or part of a commercial building—set up with a fridge, ample shelving, and a sink will allow you to exponentially accept more food and feed more people. Having a HQ will allow you to store goods that aren't able to be sent out immediately, split your collection and distribution onto different days, and even repack bulk food into smaller, donation-ready containers. In its early days, Urban Gleaners' first "warehouse" featured a 3-door commercial fridge and a sink that allowed us to pick up bulk food (from restaurants, supermarket delis, and caterers) in containers that we could wash and reuse.
4. **Expand your donation pick-up relationships.** Reach out to grocery stores for bins of bread, pastries, juice, produce, cheese, eggs, milk, and yogurt; event sites for unserved, catered food from conferences, stadiums, funerals, weddings, bar mitzvahs, and hotel breakfasts. Pizza places are ideal, and coffee roasters often have plenty of beans that are good but past their best-by date. Remember: the easier you make it for people to donate, the better luck you'll have.
5. **Register as a 501(c)(3) to allow for fundraising and the ability to give receipts for tax deduction to donors.** This is when your gleaning grows from a passionate hobby to a force to be reckoned with. Celebrate this step with balloons and a good meal. (A word of caution: this is quite the legal undertaking—time to call in some favors of friends in the know to help guide you through it.)
6. **Upgrade your wheels.** Fact: A commercial van can hold WAY more food than the back of a family station wagon! Making the leap to a proper transport vehicle doesn't have to cost retail: Many auto dealerships and rental car companies have a donation program for registered nonprofits, so don't hesitate to ask for similar programs in your community. P.S. Used vehicles also deliver just as well as new!



### *Level Three*

# HOW WE GLEAN

Ready to really take off as a gleaning superstar? Becoming the full-scale food rescue machine that Urban Gleaners is today has taken a lot of sweat, blood, and tears—but when we see the faces of children light up when they see our vans roll up, it makes every late night pick-up and weekend repacking session worthwhile. Here’s how we glean today.

1. **First things first: You’re gonna need more space.** Our current 3500-square-foot warehouse includes a kitchen for cooking and repacking, an open space lined with 5 three-door fridges and three freezers, a large walk-in fridge, an industrial scale for tracking the amount of food that comes in and out, plus our office, restrooms, and meeting room. Find a space that gives you room to grow, because the more space you have, the more volunteers you can accommodate, the more food you can rescue, and the more mouths you can feed. A walk-in fridge is an optional upgrade that will allow you to accept larger donations (e.g. from food manufacturers).

2. **Hire your staff.** While it's possible to remain an extremely lean organization while gleaning, some key hires can make everything run smoothly and make growth possible.

Recommended positions:

❖ *Executive Director:* Specializes in making community connections, speaking on behalf of the organization, networking for investments, setting up programs, and fundraising.

❖ *Director of Operations:* Volunteer coordination, driver scheduling, route timing, acting as a resource for contact persons at every pantry and drop-off point, and fielding calls/requests to donate and receive donated food.

❖ *Director of Development:* Fundraising, event planning, marketing, social media, and newsletter writing.

❖ *Warehouse Manager:* Responsible for tracking and weighing food as it enters and exits the warehouse, managing repack volunteers, and organizing and sorting food.

❖ *Outreach Coordinator:* Responsible for checking in with every donor/recipient on a regular basis, recruiting more volunteers and donors in the community.

3. **Organize your volunteer squad.** Establish regular pick-up routes and repacking schedules for your volunteers to make sure pick up consistency is key. This was important when you started gleaning, and it's just as important now. Our 45+ volunteers come in weekly to repack donated bulk foods into single-serving containers and use their own cars or bikes to pick up food from donors around the city. To keep us sane while managing volunteers, we ask that all volunteers are at least 16 years old and don't take groups larger than 6 people at a time. We also limit volunteer hours to 9am-12pm on weekdays, and encourage volunteers to come in on a schedule. Our pick-up volunteers commit to a 6-month stint of a weekly route to make sure all food is able to be picked up.

4. **Establish your direct-to-consumer drop-off points.** Instead of delivering all food to organizations and shelters, you can begin setting up your own pop-up pantries to reach people with free, fresh, delicious food where they are. We do not require identification nor proof of need at any of our donation sites. Our drop-off points include school pantries, community centers, low-income housing communities, and parks. We rely on contacts at our partner schools and other pantries to help us spread the word and supervise pantries.

5. **Expand your van fleet and hire drivers.** We've found that, while volunteers are great for picking up food and repacking it in our warehouse, our school and community pantries need extra-reliable folks to be there every week, no exceptions. Our 5 drivers pick up food from our warehouse and set up our school pantries and mobile markets. Invest in great people, because high turnover in this job can be a major pain point for your organization. P.S. This is the time to level up to refrigerated trucks or vans!

6. **Organize your goods.** Beyond the fridges which house all perishable food, our warehouse has designated spots for bread/baked goods, packaged shelf-stable goods, and a large table for organizing incoming deliveries. We also have designated shelves for food that's truly past its prime, which a few pig farmers in the region come to pick up.



7. **Set up a system that keeps track of when items need to be delivered.** We use a system of red, yellow, and green magnets that move around our fridges to alert our driver distributors to food that needs to be delivered ASAP. Green food can stick around for a few more days, yellow food is on deck, and red food should go out NOW. Instruct drivers to pick up a variety of goods for each drop-off to offer a diverse selection of goods for every pantry.
8. **Streamline your repacking system.** Repacking food allows you to accept bulk donations from event sites, commissary kitchens, and food distributors. Purchase family-sized takeout-style containers and a label maker, and put your volunteers to work splitting up large donations into manageable portions with labels that clearly show what's inside. We recommend using symbols (like a chicken, and egg, or a pig) in addition to words on labels to accommodate for a diversity of languages and literacy levels.
9. **Focus on fundraising.** We host an annual fundraising event with local chefs to raise money and awareness about the organization, as well as a few smaller events throughout the year. Aim to be a lean, green, gleaning machine with low overhead, so donated dollars go directly to your programs. Being able to accept online donations is key—so investing in a simple, attractive website that allows for direct contributions will pay for itself in no time.

# MORE RESOURCES

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## BOOKS

- ❖ *Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal* by Tristram Stuart
- ❖ *Waste-Free Kitchen Handbook: A Guide to Eating Well and Saving Money By Wasting Less Food* by Dana Gunders
- ❖ *Food Foolish: The Hidden Connection Between Food Waste, Hunger and Climate Change* by Eric B. Schultz and John M. Mandyck
- ❖ *American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It)* by Jonathan Bloom

## DOCUMENTARIES

- ❖ *Wasted! The Story Of Food Waste* with Anthony Bourdain
- ❖ *Just Eat It: A Food Waste Story*

## ORGANIZATIONS

- ❖ Chefs to End Hunger: [www.chefsendhunger.org](http://www.chefsendhunger.org)
- ❖ The USDA Gleaning Toolkit: [https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda\\_gleaning\\_toolkit.pdf](https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda_gleaning_toolkit.pdf)