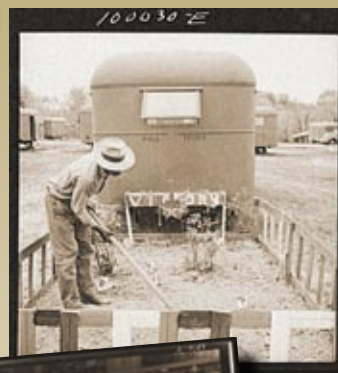


Photos of Victory Gardens in D.C. and New York appear courtesy of the Library of Congress. Notably, the man shown kneeling is Vice President Henry Wallace.



The Generous Garden

Kit Johnston

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf. . . you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Deuteronomy 24:19 NRSV



Some 25 to 35 million Americans—nearly half of them children—eat less than they should or must seek emergency hunger relief because they can't afford the food they need. That is the consensus of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, chief administrator of the nation's food stamp and other government-based hunger-relief programs; Feeding America, the country's largest charitable food network; and the Garden Writers Association of America, founder of the grassroots Plant a Row for the Hungry program.

Food insecurity is growing across the country, including here in the Piedmont, by at least 20 percent—maybe by 30 percent or more, some say—due to widespread hard times. How our region addresses hunger is a wondrous patchwork quilt of many different efforts—public and private, institutional and individual, faith-based and community-based.

Woven throughout this quilt are generous farmers and gardeners who do what they can, even as they wish they could do more. A few make produce directly available to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients and those eligible for other government food-assistance programs in exchange for cash. Some provide many thousands of pounds of fresh food mostly to large, privately run food banks through flat-out donations or subsidized community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares. Many more allow volunteers from a wide variety of local agencies, food pantries, and soup kitchens to glean extra produce at the close of farmers markets for free. Some will plant extra this year and donate it at harvest as part of the Plant a Row for the Hungry (PAR) program. Untold numbers will simply show up at their

churches on Sunday to share whatever they can spare.

Last year, the private nonprofit Blue Ridge Area Food Bank Network (BRAFBN) received an unprecedented 35 tons of fresh vegetables and fruits from the Volunteer Farm of Shenandoah, helping the food bank feed at least 130,000 people. But BRAFBN spokeswoman Ruth Jones predicts that this year the food bank will come under more pressure to meet demand from those always in need—the working poor, single mothers with children, and the elderly—as well as from the newly unemployed.

“Increased demand is taxing Virginia food banks—all food banks—more than ever,” Jones says. “The Volunteer Farm has done a fabulous job. It's great to have farmers like Bob Blair in our corner.”

Bountiful Farms

Bob Blair, owner of the Volunteer Farm of Shenandoah and an *ABC World News* Person of the Year, plans to provide BRAFBN with even more fresh vegetables and fruits this year—some 50 tons, he predicts. BRAFBN will also get meat from Blair's latest volunteer farm, in the Zepp Valley near Virginia's western border, which is being used to pasture donated meat animals. Big news is the addition earlier this year of yet another farm in Culpeper County—97 acres anonymously leased to Blair's operation (at \$1 per year for 10 years). Blair plans to plant about 10 of these acres in potatoes this year and will also pasture donated meat animals here. Again, BRAFBN will benefit.

A retired federal emergency management official, Blair has faced crises before. Now he faces issues like locating a reasonably priced and certified slaughterhouse and getting more cash

donations for his operations because such donations fell somewhat in 2008 even as farmers everywhere faced cost increases. Blair's philosophy, however, is to keep asking. "If we get scared of the recession and don't ask, we don't get what we need. But everyone is finding it a little hard right now."

Other notable examples of individual farmers stepping up to the plate are Eric Plaksin and Rachel Bynum of Waterpenney Farm in Rappahannock. They plan to continue their long-standing relationship with another large nonprofit food bank in the region, D.C.'s Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB).

Waterpenney's involvement began back in 2000 as a block of 20 CSA shares sold to CAFB at a slightly reduced price, made possible because these shares were subsidized by Plaksin and Bynum and by shareholders willing to donate to the program. Plaksin reports that the number of shares CAFB has been able to purchase has fluctuated from the beginning (from 20 to 30 to 10), with supportive shareholders donating enough for 5 or 6 additional shares each year. The farm also donates shares,

bringing the total weekly shares delivered to 18 in the past few years. In addition, Waterpenney donates surplus and oddly shaped produce to CAFB. And "good vegetables" left from the Sunday market are donated locally to the Rappahannock Senior Center's meal program.

Government Efforts

Other farmers are pitching in too, in both formal and informal ways, whether by participating in government food-assistance programs, by donating extra produce, or by planting extra crops. The

according to an informal survey still underway by state Cooperative Extension Community Viability Specialist Matt Benson.

So far Benson has turned up only one Virginia farmers market with an active EBT-acceptance program: Five Points Community Market in the Tidewater. While other market managers have indicated their interest, the expense of EBT-acceptance technology (wireless receivers at markets without electricity can cost \$1,000 each) has been an obstacle, as has the need for government pre-approval. "Navigating the bureaucracy has been a problem," Benson says. Thanks to outside grants, at least 2 markets in the D.C. area have EBT-technology capability. Taking the cue, Benson is now pursuing such grants for Virginia markets.

WIC FMNP was designed to allow eligible children below the age of 5 and low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women to purchase fresh, local produce from farmers markets and roadside stands. According to the USDA website, 2.3 million people nationwide enrolled in WIC received this additional benefit in fiscal year 2007. Last year in Virginia, 147,453 WIC families and individuals and 17 Virginia farmers markets participated in the program. But state officials recently announced an end to that program in Virginia, at least for the next 2 years.

Michael Burns is manager of WIC FMNP at the Virginia Department of Health, which administered the program together with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS). According to Burns, the program provided eligible women and children with an additional WIC benefit worth \$20 to \$40 in the growing season to purchase fresh produce from pre-approved farmers. But the state's matching funds had to be cut from Governor Tim Kaine's 2009–2010 budget request due to state revenue shortfalls. The USDA had already cut postpartum women from the program, which had been limited to 7 health districts, including Arlington and Fairfax. All along the way, Virginia has tried several times to expand the program, "but we simply haven't been able to," Burns says.

Not all is lost, Burns emphasized in a recent announcement, because the regular Virginia WIC program "will be implementing . . . changes to facilitate purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables on a statewide, year-around basis," which, according to VDACS and other state agencies, means being able to get more produce at grocery stores.

Meanwhile, farmers have lost out. Fairfax Farmers Market Manager Kim Haun characterizes the impact of the program's end on the 10 Fairfax markets that sold fresh produce to some 8,000 WIC FMNP participants in Fairfax last year as a "significant loss of income for some of our vendors." Yet Hana Newcomb of Potomac Vegetable Farms, who accepted WIC FMNP vouchers at her roadside stand in Vienna, laments that the amount of money WIC FMNP mothers had to spend always struck her as "pathetically small."

Meanwhile, the USDA's parallel senior program remains intact in the state, albeit in a limited way. At present, Senior FMNP operates in 7 locations, most in the southwest and southeast but also in Augusta and Arlington Counties. According to the State Department of Aging's Senior FMNP Director Elaine Smith, the program (fully federally funded excepting administrative costs) has been successful—involving about 152 Virginia farmers and 11,000 seniors in 2008 alone. Smith recently asked the USDA to

expand it so that more seniors meeting certain income requirements can continue to receive \$40 to spend over a given season at, possibly, more pre-approved farmers markets. Because Congress's 2008 farm bill added \$5 million for the program, Smith is hopeful that Virginia will "get a piece of that."

All in all, given the mixed success to date of government food-assistance programs that incorporate farm-fresh produce, Benson urges farmers throughout the region to continue to do what they have mostly done privately, including working with food banks like BRAFBN, CAFB, and others.

Resourceful Food Banks

Headquartered outside of Staunton and serving more than 400 distribution points across a wide swath of Virginia (including 25 counties and 9 cities), the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank Network is used to jumps in demand during the holidays and winter months, when heating bills compete with food dollars in family budgets. But this year, says BRAFBN's Jones, the agency is seeing more new clients without jobs and homes in addition to those low-income families and individuals experiencing government-benefit limitations. BRAFBN is encouraging those who are eligible to apply for SNAP. "To be food secure, people need food from more sources than us," Jones notes.

With no government support—except for some increasingly scarce USDA nonperishable commodities—BRAFBN's challenges include having enough cash to purchase more food at a time when cash donations seem to be falling off. During the holidays, "we got a nice boost," Jones says, and if the General Assembly passes a proposed \$1 million grant for Virginia food banks, that could help as well. Still, after the holidays, "we always see donations plummet, and that happened again this year, on top of a summer which was one of our worst," Jones explains. "People just weren't donating, even as we anticipate that we will need more money to do everything across the board." New strategies include getting larger donations from individual contributors all year. BRAFBN also needs more volunteers. "If we didn't have volunteers," Jones says, "we'd have no operation."

Like BRAFBN, the Capital Area Food Bank is a member of the Federation of Virginia Food Banks. CAFB is also an affiliate of the Feeding America program, which encourages food banks

to engage in initiatives that facilitate more access to and use of fresh produce. Last year, CAFB distributed about 20 million pounds of food—including 6 million pounds of fresh produce—to 383,000 people. Officials at CAFB, a nonprofit organization, say demand is growing.

Flexible Farmers Markets

From the heart of urban D.C. to the heart of the rural Shenandoah Valley, farmers markets and individual vendors within them contribute to the public and private

Society of St. Andrew

Based in Big Island, Virginia, the Society of St. Andrew—"America's premier food salvage ministry"—operates 3 hunger relief programs: the Potato and Produce Project, the Gleaning Network, and the Harvest of Hope. The Potato and Produce Project alone has distributed more than 400 million pounds of produce across the country since its inception in 1983 by salvaging truckloads of produce rejected by commercial markets and directing it to local hunger-relief organizations. In 2008, it distributed 2.7 million pounds in Virginia alone. Through its Gleaning Network, the Society mobilizes volunteers nationwide to glean "tens of millions of pounds" from farmers' fields (with permission) for local hunger-relief organizations. It estimates that to date, more than 164 million pounds of food have been gleaned by almost 400,000 volunteers. Harvest of Hope is the society's faith-based outreach program, which educates participants about the national and international hunger crisis and "encourages them to make lifelong commitments to be part of the solution." The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank gets some of its fresh produce from the Potato and Produce Project, and some farmers in the region, such as Hana Newcomb of Potomac Vegetable Farms, "happily" look for society members and other volunteers to take her extra produce at the close of farm market days. Learn more at the Society's website: endhunger.org.



fight against hunger in various ways, most of which primarily involve local agencies or volunteer gleaners.

With 11 separate market locations within its borders, Fairfax County takes its farmers markets and their connection to the community seriously. Markets Manager Kimberly Haun was dismayed when she learned in late January of Virginia's suspension of the WIC FMNP. "We're not happy at all. We participated a great deal. WIC FMNP seemed to be a significant part of our vendors' business." Meanwhile, gleaners from faith-based organizations have had a good relationship with the Fairfax markets and will be permitted to glean at close of market again this season. "We'd love to do anything more that we can, including participating in the seniors program and possibly even by accepting food stamps," says Haun, although Fairfax markets don't have access to electricity with which to operate EBT.

Charlottesville City Market Manager Stephanie Anderegg-Maloy reports that quite a few farmers and food vendors there have provided close-of-market donations to the Salvation Army and the local Children, Youth, and Family Services agency in the past. She expects the latter to continue this arrangement in 2009 in alternating shifts with the Jefferson Area Board of Aging (JABA), which provides home-delivered meals to seniors, among other services. Innovatively, the market may also partner with JABA to subsidize and distribute "City Market Bucks" to encourage SNAP participants to visit the market. If the response is good, Anderegg-Maloy says the market may be interested in investing in EBT technology.

Plant a Row for the Hungry

It is not a stretch to assume many of the 70 million gardeners in the United States grow more than they can eat. In 1994, Anchorage-based garden columnist Jeff Lowenfels began to calculate that if gardeners planted an extra row of vegetables with the intent of donating the harvest, many hungry people could be fed. He encouraged his readers to plant a row for a soup kitchen in Anchorage after feeling guilty for refusing to give a panhandler money for food.

When the Garden Writers Association of America learned of Lowenfels's initiative, it launched Plant a Row for the Hungry



First Ladies, Victory Gardens & Service Days

In 1943, first lady Eleanor Roosevelt tore up part of the White House lawn to create a Victory Garden and encouraged citizens to do the same at home.

By the end of World War II, according to Rappahannock Plant a Row's Hal Hunter, Americans were raising 40 percent of their own produce. Even as some are drawing comparisons between our current economic situation and the crisis during the Roosevelt administration, others are encouraging Americans to plant Victory Gardens again. But this time, the people are asking the first lady to follow their example. Check out eattheview.org and thevictorygardeninitiative.com.

not-so-good news is that while many Americans think they can rely on government programs to help them put food on the table, farmers in Virginia, the region's largest agricultural state, have found that's not necessarily the case, even in these hard times. "We're seeing newly unemployed breadwinners looking for a boost now, but [we're] also [seeing] government-assistance beneficiaries whose benefits are limited," says BRAFBN's Jones.

Even as the demand for hunger relief grows, Virginia farms have had limited participation in USDA hunger-assistance programs that are designed in part to bring those in need and farmers together—like the long-standing, fully funded Food Stamp Program (now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP); the newer, partially funded Women, Infants, and Children Farmers Market Nutrition Program (WIC FMNP); and the even newer, fully funded Senior FMNP.

Over 600,000 individuals purchased food through SNAP—which uses Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards instead of food stamps—in Virginia in 2008, up from some 530,000 in 2007. Yet the program's reliance on EBT cards has meant fewer farmers and farmers markets are interested in participating,

Plant a Row for the Hungry

PAR projects have been established in the counties listed below. For information on the Garden Writers Association of America or to start PAR in your area, visit www.gardenwriters.org.

Clarke
scarroll@virginia.edu
(540) 837-1758, ext. 287

Loudoun
plantarow@vpcl.com
(540) 454-2732

Rappahannock
hal@rappahannock.com
(540) 937-4744



on a national level, and for the past 15 years, this charitable, nonprofit program has encouraged grassroots formation of local committees of gardeners and others to donate surplus garden produce to local food banks and pantries, soup kitchens, and service organizations. Last year alone, about 27,000 North American PAR gardeners and other volunteers nationwide donated over 1.4 million pounds of fresh produce, supported in part by tax-deductible cash donations from businesses and individuals.

Julia Brizendine, owner of VPC Landscape Construction in Purcellville, has been a gardener all her life, yet she never knew that food banks and soup kitchens accepted fresh produce. "All the food drives I'd ever heard of accepted only nonperishable goods," she points out. She was looking into how to respond to Barack and Michelle Obama's invitation to engage in a national day of service in her community on Martin Luther King Jr. Day when she came across information about PAR on the Garden Writers Association website. She listed a PAR event on the USAService.org website after discussing the need for fresh produce with Loudoun Interfaith Relief, the most consistent gleaner of market-day produce at the 6 markets operated in Loudoun

and operator of the largest, and only nutritious, food pantry in the county.

The result has been the formation of a new Loudoun County Volunteer Committee with some 35 county residents committed to encouraging fellow residents to plant extra rows—Interfaith Relief requests hard fruits, tomatoes, beans, and squash—and donate the results to Interfaith Relief; volunteers may also help glean produce from markets and farm fields.

In mid-January, Rappahannock environmental activist Hal Hunter, using the county's local listserv of some 800 area residents, called attention to rising unemployment and invited local gardeners and farmers to help him form a local PAR com-

mittee. At press time, he had received more than 70 responses, including responses from many of the area's sustainable agriculture farms, farm-based schools (Mt. Laurel Montessori and Belle Meade), and students and teachers involved in Rappahannock County Public Schools' Farm-to-Table program. Farm- and garden-donated fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs will be dropped off and picked up at the Link, a private, nonprofit community center in Sperryville. Hunter is now seeking other volunteers to help with distribution and tax-deductible donations to defray the cost of rent at the Link. The local Board of Supervisors also recently approved the creation of a Rappahannock food bank to further assist the estimated 700 county residents with substandard diets or a need for emergency food.



Culpeper Food Closet

This small private, nonprofit food bank, or "closet"—which operates out

of space donated by St. Stephens Episcopal Church—served 110,000 food items in 2008, and that number will certainly rise in 2009. Dick Rosica (who directs the CFC with his wife, Barbara) says they are now helping many families who are in crisis for the first time. Private cash donations have begun to help with the growing demand. The CFC receives and distributes mostly canned or boxed nonperishable items donated by area churches, businesses, and individuals, because it has no storage capacity for fresh produce other than eggs. But when the waiting room is filled in summer with vegetables and fruits donated by local farmers and gardeners, those items "disappear in a flash." Learn more at www.culpeperfoodcloset.net.

What You Can Bring to the Pot

We can all learn a lesson from this children's story: Someone comes to town and claims to make a wonderful soup flavored with only a stone. Each neighbor, poor and hungry but curious, contributes a small ingredient (say, a carrot or an onion) in order to get a portion of the finished soup. Once everyone has contributed something small, the "stone" soup is wonderful, indeed. The need for food donations can seem overwhelming and our ability to affect change may seem small in comparison, but working together, we can help those in crisis.

So tend extra plants in your garden, volunteer to glean or distribute produce, and donate as much cash as you are able, knowing that together, these small "ingredients" will feed many.

Kit Johnston is a freelance writer and editor, chef, yoga instructor, and owner of La Bella Terra B&B in Madison County.

These organizations need food and cash donations as well as volunteers.

Federation of Virginia Food Banks

www.vafoodbanks.org
(757) 314-4572

Volunteer Farm of Shenandoah

www.worldfoundationforchildren.com
(540) 459-3478

*Farm store and 8 city buyers clubs
in Northern and Central Virginia*

Mount Vernon Farm



Pastured Products
*100% Grass-fed Beef and Lamb
Pastured Pork and Eggs*
Raised without hormones, antibiotics, or chemicals

Farm Store Hours:
1-5 pm, Friday and Saturday
other times by appointment

206 Mount Vernon Lane
Sperryville, VA 22740
mtvfarm@verizon.net

540-987-9559
www.mountvernonfarm.net