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Ripe for the Picking

The tradition of gleaning is being revived in the suburbs as foragers find flavor just over the fence, writes **Paul Mitchell**

We are the loquat house. Every spring when the fruit ripens on the tree in our front yard, elderly Greek men in suits and widows in black appear on our doorstep, asking if they can fill their empty shopping bags with this strange, bitter crop. I say yes, of course, and they go to work on the low branches. I bring the stepladder from the backyard and get busy plucking the fruit from the upper limbs.

I'd never heard of loquats before moving into our house in Kingsville four years ago. Now I know they're the first of the summer stone fruits to ripen, they're native to southeastern China, took off to Japan about 1,000 years ago, then migrated to the sub-continent. They later spread throughout the Mediterranean basin, hence the visits from our Greek friends, who tell me they use them in fruit salads, jams and chutneys. Loquats are too tart for my family's taste, but I'm glad they find their way to local jars and bowls.

Our tiny suburb is, literally, ripe for gleaning. During summer, branches heavy with fruit hang over fences in the many laneways. Our family's dusk walks have seen us return with the bottom of the pusher full of peaches, plums, apricots, figs, pomegranates and even passionfruit. Herbs are bountiful and, of course, lemons. It's amazing how much food you can get by picking what is hanging in the suburb, or by going the extra step and asking neighbors if you can have some of their surplus.

We glean, but we're minor players compared to Jonathan and Kim Cornford in Footscray. Jonathan has a PhD in international development, and has studied and worked in the Mekong delta, assessing poverty in southwest Vietnam. Kim has put her honours degree in economics to work in poverty-stricken Laos and with marginalized people in inner city Melbourne. The couple now run a not-for-profit organization called Manna Gum, which educates churches and other faith organisations about what the Judeo-Christian tradition says about economics.

"We run popular education around understanding how the ways in which we live contributes to outcomes in poverty, understanding that link," Jonathan says, adding that people talk a lot about the planet's health. "We ask what health 'looks' like when it comes to our neighbours, the community and the earth."

For the Cornfords, it looks like a backyard full of chooks and fruit trees; a thriving vegetable patch, including homegrown garlic and herbs – even a bee hive on the garage roof. Gleaning the local neighbourhood for food was a logical next step for them. And they have a systematic, seasonal and multi-box approach to harvesting the suburb.

“We get boxes of apricots, peaches, plums and, of course, lemons,” Kim says. “But we also get feijoas, figs, almonds, apples . . .”

Through gleaning, the Cornfords are almost self-sustaining in fruit. They make their own cordial, preserve dozens of fruits, make a dessert to die-for called figs in port, even lollies from lemon rind. They join with teams of other neighbourhood gleaners and visit local trees according to the season, boxes in hand, and the neighbours know they’re coming.

The Cornfords have strong relationships in the community and now network with other gleaners citywide. They swap each other’s harvests, meaning the couple has scored cherries and nashi pears from over east. And Feral Fruit Trees Melbourne, a website created by Axel White, now marks trees ready to glean. He says there were plenty of international fruit tree maps online, but none in Australia.

“I was out riding my bike with a friend during autumn while there were a lot of trees fruiting at the time, and mentioned how great it would be to map them all out and do a big harvest.”

Axel got back on his bike and plotted the fruiting trees in the Brunswick area that were outside the boundary of private property or had branches hanging over a fence.

“Suburban fruit picking is an old idea, kids have always done it. Of course, it’s getting a lot more attention now because of a growing concern for the environment,” he says, adding that he encourages gleaners to always ask owners if it’s okay to take fruit, even if it is hanging in public spaces.

Jonathan and Kim find that, even after swapping with fellow gleaners, they have leftovers, which they donate to the food co-op to which they belong, to other families, and to the poor.

“We don’t consider ourselves poor, although we are statistically on the low-income scale,” Jonathan says, “but gleaning has had an economic impact for us. And, for people struggling to put together a food budget, gleaning certainly could be significant.”

For the Cornfords, neighbourhood gleaning has its basis in an ancient Jewish rural economic practice. The Torah, especially the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, refers to it, with Leviticus saying, “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien.”

Refugees and the poor could gather (glean) the leftovers, what farmers didn’t – or couldn’t – harvest. The later rabbinical writers said farmers must not benefit from gleanings, and were not permitted to discriminate among the poor, nor frighten them away with dogs or lions. The gleaning idea spread to Europe, evidenced by 19th Century French artworks, particularly Jean-François Millet’s

famous *Des Glaneuses* (1857). In 19th century England, gleaning was a legal right for 'cottagers', farm labourers who didn't own land.

Today, the Slow Movement defines gleaning as groups collecting crops from fields that have been mechanically harvested, or fields where, due to low market prices, it's not economically profitable to harvest. It doesn't talk about neighbourhood gleaning, but says farm gleaning is one of a number of 'food recovery' processes, including salvage from restaurants, that help feed today's poor.

The Society of St Andrew in the US is entirely dedicated to feeding the poor through gleaning, its volunteers gathering leftover fruit and vegetables from fields. Faith Feeds in Kentucky has a similar ethic, as does Island Grown, an organization based on Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. Table to Table in Israel, following the biblical edict, also institutes gleaning as part of its wider program of food redistribution. And, while they don't feed the poor, New England's The Three Foragers explain on their blog how to collect and cook the food growing wild on their doorstep. However, apart from Greek and Italian Australians continuing the practice in the suburbs, the ancient custom of gleaning hasn't gained much traction here.

"The Hebrew Bible has numerous laws around food waste and the surplus economy," Jonathan says. "The Torah has an economic vision at its heart and it's based on there being such a thing as too much and certainly such a thing as too little. The 'promised land' is a place where everyone has enough."

The ancient Hebrews also had a challenging notion of property rights, claiming that beyond a certain point personal property belonged to the community.

"There was a stakehold in your property that the rest of the community had, particularly the poor."

So, taking an ancient Middle Eastern perspective, that peach I just picked from my neighbour's tree belonged to me anyway. Perhaps this is instinctive knowledge, and why neighbours are happy to give away their excess.

"The Torah has laws which, to us, across the chasm of history and geography, seem bizarre. But, actually, they are the outworking of a vision of enough for everyone and ecological care."