

# “Sharecropping” Excerpted From June 2018 Issue of *Berkshire Magazine*

## Backyard Bounty distributes surplus to those in need

By Hannah Van Sickle



Mark Lefenfeld and Jay Weintraub are expanding their community-based enterprise, with the goal of addressing food insecurity in the Berkshires. Photo by Megan Haley

Virginia Goldner of Sheffield enjoys living in a place where the rumble of farm equipment punctuates the serenity of her surroundings. When her neighbors at Balsam Hill Farm inquired about grazing their cows in her meadow, she quickly agreed. Not surprisingly, she was equally eager to share the seasonal surplus that left her apple trees laden and grape arbors heavy with the weight of excess produce she couldn't possibly use.

“There were just never enough ways to give this food away,” says Goldner.

Until now, she and her husband Stephen Rosenheck see their involvement with Backyard Bounty of the Berkshires as simultaneously modest and meaningful.

As summer approaches, Backyard Bounty founders Mark Lefenfeld and Jay Weintraub are steadily expanding their community-based enterprise, one reliant upon various cogs to create a well-oiled machine aimed at addressing food insecurity in the Berkshires.

“I was immediately captivated by the project,” says Goldner of the nonprofit’s highly personal harvesting practices: gathering ripe, fresh vegetables and fruit from Berkshire farms and local residents’ backyards—food that would otherwise go to waste—and distributing it to those in need. Many individuals join forces to make Backyard Bounty work, and just as many reap the benefits of fresh, local food. Last year, despite challenges ranging from lack of refrigerated storage space to a shortage of distribution centers, Backyard Bounty collected a whopping 7,000 pounds of excess produce throughout the growing season. As the 2018 season unfolds, the founders are looking beyond homeowners’ backyards with the aim of building upon the success of their inaugural year.

In their quest to eradicate food waste and alleviate food insecurity, Lefenfeld and Weintraub are now tapping into another jackpot of connections: local farmers. Max Morningstar of **MX Morningstar Farms** in nearby Copake, New York, met the pair last summer at the Great Barrington Farmers Market. Lefenfeld and Weintraub make it easy for farmers to help, says Morningstar who—in the absence of any formal agreement—was immediately sold on the idea of unloading leftover produce. “There’s a certain amount of shrink that you plan for,” he explains, pointing to perfectly good food that might otherwise go to waste. As Morningstar anticipates the season’s first crops—from lettuce, escarole, and frisée to dandelion greens and radishes—he knows Lefenfeld and Weintraub will be ready to take any donations farmers are willing to share.

“We don’t want to take anything farmers could sell,” explains Lefenfeld who prides himself on being keenly sensitive to the fragile nature of the local farming industry. That creates a bit of a puzzle at times. Last season, the organization was often faced with a sudden surplus and nowhere to store it, particularly when cold storage was required. Produce also was not always flowing to areas of need. As the 2018 growing season begins, Backyard Bounty is poised to remedy both situations. Thanks to a \$3,500 grant from Berkshire Agricultural Ventures, coupled with substantial donations from individuals and community support, plans are underway to build a customized, refrigerated storage space that will sit on the grounds of CHP/WIC in Great Barrington.

“This will expand our capacity to gather and deliver in better fashion,” says Weintraub.

Mimi and Dick Alford are physically fit and enjoy being outdoors. Volunteering their time as pickers was an obvious way for them to become involved with **Backyard Bounty**. The Alfords were enticed by the camaraderie with other volunteers, but it was the “giving back” that sealed the deal. “When fresh produce is available for everyone—in its delicious, nutritious, and colorful glory—there are smiles all around,” says Mimi Alford who, along with her husband, has worked at the **People’s Pantry** in Great Barrington distributing mostly non-perishable food to individuals in need.

Backyard Bounty is also exploring the possibility of harvesting the fruit trees at Kripalu in Lenox and the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge this year. And it is expanding its network of pantries and other distribution sites. It has partnered with Railroad Street Youth Project and Simon’s Rock to diversify its volunteer core and get more young people on board. In short, the organization is

proceeding “with a view toward building an infrastructure that will make Berkshire Bounty sustainable,” says Lefefeld.

That’s the emphasis: making it work for all. “There is always stuff leftover in the retail game,” says Morningstar. “It feels good to give that to people who need it.”

That sentiment is not lost on Sandisfield volunteer Joe Gelinas: “I have had a good life, been fortunate in so many ways, and want to help my community,” he says. If that means picking apples, he’s in.