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»On a windy spring morning, with the sky threatening rain, six people work the straw-mulched garden beds of Hoosier Hills Food Bank's organic garden.

Covering over an acre of land on the edge of Will Detmer Park in Bloomington, the garden produces thousands of pounds of food for the hungry.

John Harl of Ellettsville kneels at the end of a long row, tucking cabbage starts into compost-amended soil. A retiree who spent four years volunteering in the food bank's warehouse, he decided to expand into the garden this year.

"My mother was an Arkansas sharecropper's daughter," he says when asked if he has an agricultural background. He grew up with the expectation of pitching in on the family's large vegetable garden, and he's never been afraid of what he calls "donkey work," meaning physical labor.



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Volunteers at the Hoosier Hills Food Bank garden. Left, Sadie Dainko, Jennifer Vickers, Mark Pogue, Bobbi Boos, Patty Denison and Marvin Smitherman.

Nearby, Patty Denison of Bloomington takes a pointer from Bobbi Boos, the garden operation's sole paid employee. "That little one won't make it," says Boos, pointing to a tiny cabbage sprout Denison just planted.

"You know how I feel about thinning plants," Denison says with a smile and stoops to replace the plant with a leafier, larger specimen.

Denison and Harl are among some 400 volunteers who collectively give more than 1,300 hours in a season to plant, tend, harvest and wash produce bound for the food bank. Their efforts extend far beyond this kale and cabbage bed. Soon they will plant lettuce, onions, carrots, tomatoes, beans and squash — over 20 varieties of produce in a seasonal rotation plan created by Boos.

Boos, whose official title is garden and gleaning coordinator, says her job is intensely rewarding. "When we start to harvest, some days the food doesn't even hit the cooler," she says. "It immediately gets turned back around to agencies that provide food assistance."

Hoosier Hills Food Bank's reach is vast, serving eight southern Indiana counties through its member agencies. Emergency food pantries, day care centers, residential homes and soup kitchens are among the nonprofits receiving food. Over the course of a year, the food bank provides over 3 million pounds of food to these agencies. A mobile pantry makes monthly forays into counties that lack centralized food banks.

Since 2008, with the instigation of the garden project, the food bank has been able to distribute local, organic garden produce on a regular basis. Individual gardeners have contributed their surplus for longer than that. But the existence of dedicated crops greatly increases the number of people receiving fresh-picked vegetables and melons.

Future pickings will offer patrons one of the most popular fruits around. Bloomington Community Orchard donated several apple tree saplings (Arkansas Black, Red Free and Enterprise varieties), now planted along the eastern edge of the garden.

This is the garden's third year in Will Detmer Park, thanks to Monroe County Parks Department's granting long-term use of this land. The acreage snugs up against community garden beds, where the public can rent raised beds or plots.

Last year the garden program resulted in nearly 23,000 pounds of produce offered through the food bank's member agencies.

A whopping 71,000 additional pounds of produce comes from the food bank's gleaning program, also coordinated by Boos. Starting in June, she musters volunteers for a weekly gleaning trip to Harriman Farms, near Spencer. They bring back "seconds" from the harvest, set aside by owner William Harriman. He also gives them access to fields where he's done harvesting, and they pick what they find there.

***"When we start to harvest, some days the food doesn't even hit the cooler. It immediately gets turned back around to agencies that provide food assistance." —Bobbi Boos***

Harriman got acquainted with the food bank when representatives requested market day surplus at the Bloomington Community Farmers Market. Since 2008, he's proactively donated his excess produce. "We'll get done picking a batch of tomatoes," he says, "and I'll call them and tell them what I have, (and say) 'There's still some good stuff there, if you want to come and get it.'"

His Christian faith guides his desire to see surplus put to worthy use. "If your produce comes from God ... it's not yours. You're managing it for God," he says. "You're

	<p>supposed to manage it the way he would want it. Would he want it sitting there rotting? I don't think so."</p> <p>He says other farmers sometimes express concern about inviting a gleaning group into their fields, but he's had nothing but positive experiences with Hoosier Hills. "They stay where they're supposed to and are respectful of the property," he says. "I don't have to pick up trash after them, or baby-sit them. I don't worry about things getting torn up."</p> <p>Other farmers take part in vital ways, like Jeff Hartenfeld of Hart Farm. He starts plants from seed in his greenhouse, including the cabbage and kale being planted today.</p>	
	<p>It all adds up to a huge impact for people struggling to get food on the table.</p> <p>At Mother Hubbard's Cupboard in Bloomington, an influx of Hoosier Hills garden produce always meets with enthusiasm. Stephanie Solomon, who directs education and outreach, says, "Fruits and vegetables are expensive, and so people are really excited when we have a good variety, especially of local produce. A lot of our people are concerned about where the food comes from and what kind of soil it's grown in, and to be able to say it's from Hoosier Hills Food Bank's organic garden ... is something a lot of people are excited about."</p> <p>The highest-value items seem to be tomatoes and sweet corn, but patrons don't shy away from other less-popular vegetables. "It surprises me sometimes," she says, "how quickly things like kale will move through the pantry."</p> <p>That might be largely due to Mother Hubbard's commitment to outreach. The agency even grows produce of its own in demonstration gardens and offers regular cooking workshops and tastings. "People are much more likely to take winter squash or greens if they've tasted something simply made with them," she says.</p> <p>Back in the garden fields, volunteer Emily Winters gives her 2-year-old daughter, Hazel, a stack of seed trays to "organize" and returns to transplanting cabbage. "Knowing what we're growing for is really satisfying," Winters says. "If we bring in 1,000 pounds, it's gone within one day."</p>	

“But the best part is probably the communal aspect of it,” she says. The other volunteers echo her sentiment, each enjoying the camaraderie that comes with working together for a good cause.

In addition to weekly volunteer shifts like these, Boos hosts ad hoc groups of helpers at various times in the season. They might be student groups, Girl Scout troops, church groups or 4-H clubs.

Behind the scenes, she has a lot to do even before the volunteers arrive: tilling fields, sowing cover crops, mixing compost, creating plans, weighing and tracking outputs. She also writes grant applications for special projects.

For example, this year she initiated a “potato project” because potatoes are among the items most requested by member agencies and their patrons. She obtained grant funding from the Archer Foundation, which supports programs teaching young people to garden. On Global Youth Service Day, April 17, she worked with four area teen groups to plant 350 pounds of seed potatoes, and the youths will continue to maintain the plot over the coming season.

Given that Boos also operates Sundry Farm with her partner, John Perry, in Owen County, this year-round off-farm job might seem overwhelming to someone with less energy and passion. But her mission is to get healthy food into the hands of people who need it. So she welcomes this work that adds up to 30 hours a week during the busy season.

“The amazing thing is that I don’t do that much of it,” she says, indicating the volunteers bent over rows yellow with fresh straw, “because look what happens!”

*For more information, visit [hhfoodbank.org](http://www.hhfoodbank.org) (<http://www.hhfoodbank.org>).*

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