Tierra Garden Organics is a five acre certified organic farm located just north of Leavenworth. Farmers Eron Drew and her husband Willy Stockman grow over 200 varieties of organic vegetables, but their main crops are greens, carrots, and potatoes. Tierra Garden Organics has worked for about seven years with the Community Cupboard in Leavenworth and the Pantry at Plain Community Church, doing mostly farmer’s market gleans. Despite the busy summer farming season, Eron took some time to answer my questions about her involvement with farm to food banking.

NWH: Could you tell me why, as a grower, you decided to get involved in farm to food banking and what keeps you involved?

ED: Originally, Willy and I started farming because we wanted to make fresh organic food more available in our community. It was important to us that this resource was available to all income levels since organics tend to be seen as a luxury item. We wanted to prove that we could make organics available to everyone and still run a profitable business. We often have an excess of certain crops just because we tend to over-plant. It makes the most sense for us to pass this abundance along to families in our community rather than add it to the compost pile. Not very long ago, we were a family on a very fixed income and so are many of the families who are friends with our children. We want all of our kids’ friends to have access to good food too. This is what keeps us motivated.

NWH: What are some tips for food banks who want to reach out to farmers for the first time? When is the best time of the year to contact farmers?

• Research how other food banks implement farm to food bank.
• Apply for an Americorps grant. Essential to the success of farm to food banking is staff time dedicated to communication with farmers, volunteer wrangling, and coordination with food banks.
• It’s best to reach out to farmers in the winter or early spring.
• Most farmers will participate if the gleaning program is well-organized, reliable, and does not add burden to the work day.
• The food bank needs to supply transportation – no farm that Eron knows of can both donate product AND spare staff time for transportation.
• Thank farmers for their generous donations!
ED: Farming is very intensive once the season is underway. It is best to contact farms in the winter or early spring. By mid-spring, farmers become single-minded, and there isn't much extra time for figuring out new logistics (like adding in a gleaning program) for the upcoming season. By fall, most farmers need a little mental break before they can even begin to talk about the next growing season. Best to wait until winter.

I have always liked email as a form of first contact. It allows me to mentally process what is requested of me before responding. Phone calls and cold calling don't work for me, especially when someone is asking for a donation. I believe it is also best to ask the farmer what items they have in abundance that they would be willing to donate rather than compost versus asking for donations of particular items or crops. Farms need to remain profitable to stay in business. I have had to turn down requests because a particular group is looking for us to donate a crop that may be one of the only items that has any type of profit margin. I cannot donate away the things that keep the farm in business.

NWH: How should a food bank maintain a relationship with farmers?

ED: I feel so fortunate, because I have developed friendships with many of the people who work with the food banks and the gleaning programs in our area. It helps to be in a small town....everyone knows everyone. For me, maintaining the relationship means maintaining our friendships. I also like to know that the items I am donating are not going to waste once they leave the farm. I talk with the gleaners regularly to make sure that I am only donating what is being used and am not just 'dumping' my excess on them.

Also, in order for the farmer/food bank relationship to be successful, it is imperative that the food bank is willing to supply the labor needed for gleaning (from the field or after a farmers market). If you rely on the farm to provide both the donation and the labor needed to move the donated produce from the farm to the food bank, the relationship will ultimately fail. No farms that I am aware of have the additional time/staffing to be both the donor and the transport.

NWH: How can we support farmers so they want to be involved in farm-to-food banking?

ED: Again this goes back to labor and communication. Both food banks that we work with regularly have
a gleaner who comes to the end of each farmers market. We are asked if we have any items that we would like to donate, but we are never pressured to donate.

When we have larger quantities of items that need to be gleaned from the field (i.e. gopher nibbled beets), the food bank has always provided the bins and the labor. All we have had to do is call the gleaning program, set up a time and date, and then they have taken care of the rest.

Some farms may want a receipt provided so that they can report the donation on their taxes. We don’t do this, but I can see how a larger farm or farms that do not have a close personal relationship with their food bank liaisons would see this receipt as an acknowledgement of the donation being made. Thank you cards go a long way too. I think that every season I have received a hand-written thank you note from the local food bank. People in town sometimes stop me and thank me personally for our donations. For me, this acknowledgment is enough to continue participating.

For more information about Tierra Garden Organics, see their website and blog.
For more information about farmer’s market recovery, see Rotary First Harvest’s Resource Guide.

For more information about starting or developing your farm-to-food bank initiative, please email growingconnections@northwestharvest.org, or contact Laura Titzer at 206.923.7423