



Planting, Harvesting and Long Spoons

At Grow-A-Row, Chip Paillex and his crew of farmers and volunteers find that by feeding others they reap more than they sow

by Diana Cercone

Every year at harvest time I face the same question: What to do with the surplus? The garden that had once looked tiny and tidy had morphed into a giant vegetable-producing machine. So, like other home gardeners I know, I gave them away to friends and family.

Unlike me, Chip Paillex found a better way. He thought of his abundance, the blessings that had been bestowed upon him—and then he thought of others. Those less fortunate than he. By chance—he would say divine intervention—he noticed a small article in the local paper about the Flemington Food Pantry making a plea to local gardeners to bring in their excess produce. Didn't

take the then 34-year-old corporate executive long to figure out what to do with his.

That was five years ago. Because of a transfer with Unilever Ice Cream where he worked, Chip, along with his family, was moved from Bergen County to Pittstown, with Chip becoming the company's custom development manager for the Northeast. Since then, what began as one gentle man's action—to share his harvest and to give back to his newly adopted community—has blossomed into a well orchestrated organization, Grow-A-Row, with a committed and dedicated group of more than 125 adult and youth volunteers, and growing each year in outreach programs as well as plans for a children's book.



Paul Heston

Six-year-old volunteer Luke Da Silva tests the newly turned dirt for planting. Chip Paillex, founder and head of the program Grow-A-Row with daughter Kyra, 8, and the owners of

PEACEFUL VALLEY

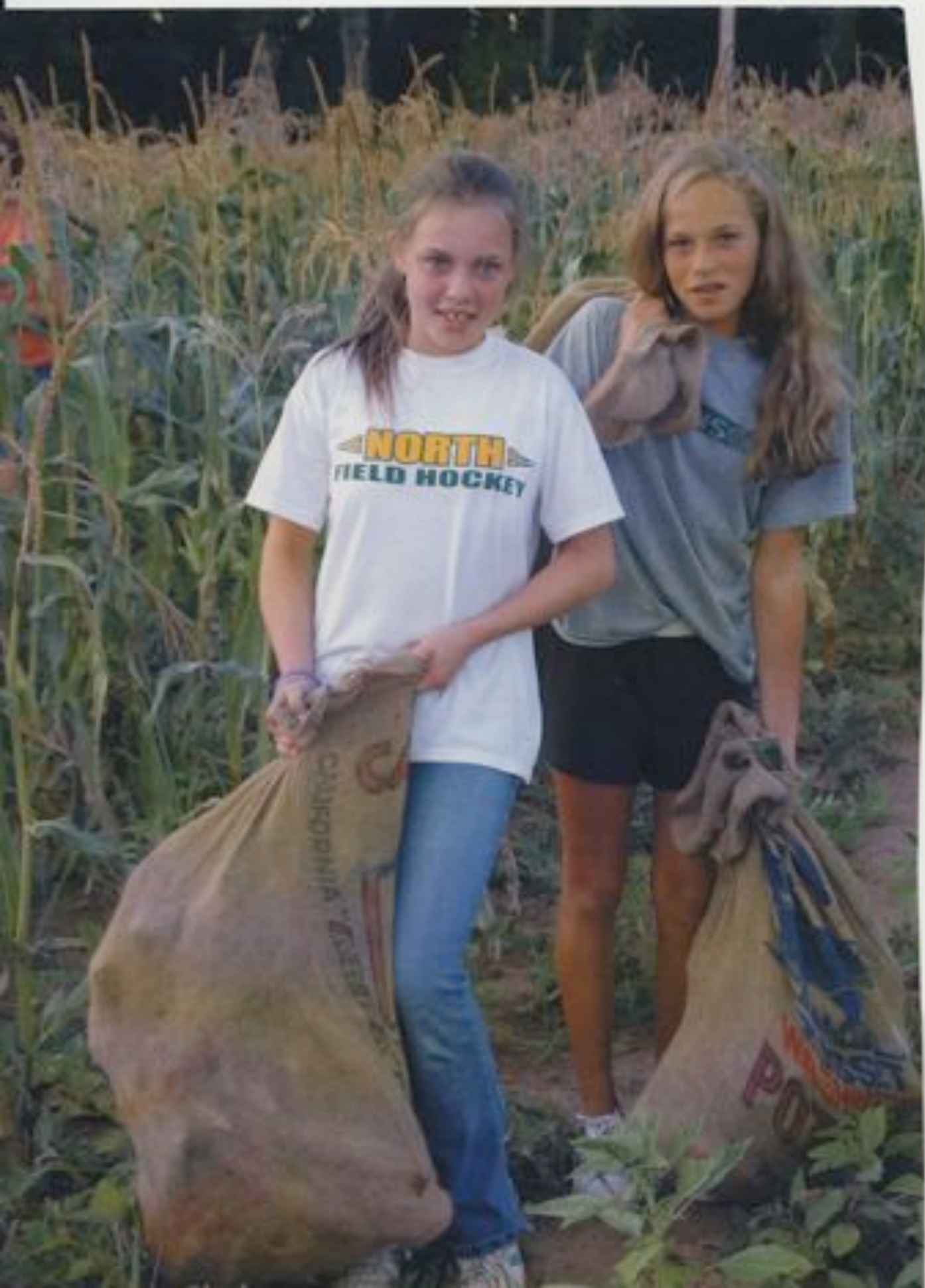


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The day I was to meet Chip late last summer, the weathermen were calling for torrential rain, with severe thunderstorms and lightning in the afternoon. We were to meet at one o'clock at Peaceful Valley Orchards in Pittstown, one of the two farms he and his organization of volunteers uses to grow vegetables. In addition to our interview, a scheduled tour of the area Grow-A-Row farms was to be included. Setting out around noon I doubted that was going to happen. The skies had darkened and looked like buckets of rain were lining up to let loose any minute. Images of Mickey Mouse trying to stave off the multiplying marching buckets of water in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" fast-forwarded in my head. Okay I had thought, I'll be happy if I hear him over the thunder as I turned on my windshield wipers and spotted flashes of lightning in the distance.

Ten minutes from the farm on Pittstown Road (Route 518), the drops of darkness lifted. The sun shed its shroud and smiled out from a sky of robin's egg blue just as I turned into the farm's parking lot. No clouds in sight. Only the bustle of friendly people, greeting each other, friend and stranger alike, as they pulled in and out of Peaceful Valley Orchards' market, arms loaded with bags and bushels of fresh produce, homemade pies, pasta sauces and salsas, honeys and breads. Standing on the porch, with a grin wider than the Raritan, was a tall, tan and healthy looking young man. I knew it had to be Chip.

Spotting me at the same time, he walked towards me, extended his hand, saying, "What a beautiful day you picked." Huh? Were we on the same planet?

But that's the way it's been for this soft-spoken man for the last five years—blue skies, sun and rain when needed. That also goes for farm land, equipment and help, not to mention his small army of volunteers, mostly all from his church, the Bethlehem Presbyterian Church in Pittstown, including his own daughter of 8, Kyra, and several of her friends.

It all started, he says, very simply. Shortly after moving here, he said, he felt the need to plant a garden. "I've never grown anything in my life," he says. "But it was being here, something in the Hunterdon County air—in its farming heritage—that made me want to have a garden." At that same time a local farm, Farmland Markets, was advertising small plots of land to lease for personal use. Chip answered the ad. Ironically he was the only one to do so. Happy for the opportunity, he leased a plot 30 feet by 30 feet and quickly learned the domestic art of farming, reading books on planting and raising vegetables and befriending farmers who gladly gave of their time and expertise, especially Farmer Ron Bartson at Farmland Markets and the managers at the Clinton Agway, John Kusner and Carole VandenBergh, who continually give advice on bug and weed problems, when to plant and when to harvest.

After making several trips to the Flemington Food Pantry with his surplus of vegetables, and before his last harvest, he had the Grow-A-Row program firmly plotted out in his mind. But the next year Farmland Markets had closed and changed owners. No matter—he knew he'd find another.



Opposite, Jennifer Lambert, 12, gets help from her friend Olivia Murphy, 12, gloaming over at Peaceful Valley Orchards. Lorraine Mancini and Jane Weiss help in the initial planting of corn, cabbage, tomatoes, eggplant, squash, cucumbers, broccoli and peppers. Cheyenne Dodge, 10, bustles to get all her sweet corn transplants in the ground.



Gary and Jackie Ettet, owners of Express Lane Farm in Frenchtown, also help with gleanng corn for Grow-A-Row. Chip shows off their bumper crop of cucumbers. At the initial planting in late spring, more than 40 volunteer "farmers" dig in, including Michael Buckley, pastor of Bethlehem Presbyterian Church in Pottstown (right)

offered him a plot on their farm, Express Lane. That year the three of them tended the garden and donated approximately \$3,000 worth of fresh vegetables to the Flemington Food Pantry in the name of the Bethlehem Presbyterian Church.

Word spread and Chip was asked to open the program to the entire congregation. That was no problem. What was was the Emers' farm situated in Frenchtown, which would be too far for most of the parishioners/volunteers to tend to on a regular basis. Not being shy when it comes to Grow-A-Row, Chip approached Jeremy and Meredith Compton, owners of Peaceful Valley Orchards, located just down the road from the 276-year-old church. The Comptons didn't hesitate, readily offering a quarter of an acre for the project, plus their help to prep the land and to donate any starter plants and seeds to get the garden going.

The way Chip devised it he would continue tending the garden at the Emers, and the larger one at Peaceful Valley Orchards would be planted and maintained by Grow-A-Row's volunteers, with him working side-by-side with them. Before the next spring planting, Chip came up with an easy to follow plan, taking the volunteers through planting to tending the garden and to harvesting and delivering the freshly picked vegetables to the Food Pantry.

The program kicks into full gear late spring when Chip and around 35 volunteers meet for the initial planting day at Peaceful Valley. By this time, the Comptons have already tilled and fertilized the land for them, including laying down rolls of protective plastic over the ground to inhibit weeds. Before the volunteers show up Chip marks off rows for planting, using plumber's line to create the rows for them to follow. "Especially for the kids," he explained, "so they create straight rows not crop circles."

The cadre of volunteers, adult and child alike, take their commitment seriously, knowing that what they plant today will feed more than 2,000 hungry people before summer's end. Holes are systematically cut into the plastic where deep holes in the dirt will be dug for the starter plants and seeds. Much of the actual planting falls to the children, said Chip, which gives them a sense of being part of something bigger, a part of the farming community—gaining an awareness of what they do will benefit others. Hunterdon County, he said, is "affluent on the surface, but there are still people in need here and to raise the children's awareness of this is something beautiful, and something they'll remember for the rest of their lives." It's also a way of supporting family farms, he said, which are dwindling all too quickly.

To help the kids do their best, Chip designed his own measuring stick, a 10-inch-long dowel, with a one-inch marker etched into it. The kids use them to dig holes one-inch deep for the starter plant or seed, then flip it on its side and measure 10 inches down for the next hole, repeating to finish their row. Meantime others mix soil with enhancements, which they will use to cover the beginner plants and seeds—after they're planted in the new and





squash, cucumbers, broccoli and peppers will get planted before the day's end.

An irrigation system is set up, and families or groups of two to five people sign up for a week where they "own" or tend the garden—watering, weeding, harvesting and delivering. Come the peak-picking season—from mid-July through September—teams of eight to 20 volunteers come out about three times a week to pick on coordinated Sunday evenings. Besides the produce they grow from their own gardens, both the Comptons and the Erters give Grow-A-Row gleaners rights. Again teams of volunteers come out. Early in the morning, they show up—usually before five to give them enough time to go home, shower and dress for work or after in the evening—to pick up the corn missed by the Comptons' and Erters' machines. "It's usually about an hour's worth of work," said Chip. "We try to keep it long enough to get the work done, but short enough so it's not a strain."

"Deliveries are made to the pantries the same day as picking, no later than the next. You can't get fresher than that." Before the season is over, the volunteers will have harvested more than 13 tons of produce, including 16,303 pounds of corn, 2,339 of cucumbers and 1,361 of zucchini. Besides the Farmington Food Pantry, deliveries are also made to support NORWESCAP, the Somerset Food Pantry, as well as some smaller food pantries.

But it's not all work. There's plenty of good old-fashioned fun, food and camaraderie, including the annual pizza party after planting day, ice cream treats in between and a harvest celebration at the end of the season where the children also bake zucchini bread and pies to add to the produce deliveries. But mainly it's the satisfaction of helping others that's the big draw, says Chip, who often uses his favorite parable to illustrate what Grow-A-Row is all about.

A holy man was having a conversation with the Lord one day and said, "Lord, I would like to know what heaven and hell are like." The Lord led the holy man to two doors. He opened one of the doors and the holy man looked in. In the middle of the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew, which smelled delicious and made the holy man's mouth water.

The people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoon back into their mouths. The holy man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. The Lord said, "You have seen Hell."

They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one. There was a large round table with a large pot of stew, which made the holy man's mouth water. The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, but here the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. The holy man said, "I don't understand."

"It is simple," said the Lord. "It requires but one skill. You see, they have learned to feed each other. While the greedy think only



Volunteer Alita Lambert picks in with gleaners. Loading up their SUV's with corn for the Farmington Food Pantry after a Sunday of gleaners are, from left to right, front row, Gary Ertter, Sue Dean, Chip Paillet and Angela Townsend. Back row, from left to right, Pete Ashby, Cathy Lewis, Chryssie Dodge, 10, Jackie Ertter, Alita Lambert, Sara Hurford, 16, Holly Murphy, 16, Olivia Murphy, 12, Jennifer Lambert, 12, Susan Paillet, Len Ashby, Emily Lewis, 14, and Mrs. Ellen Collins.

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"Coming out to this area has certainly heightened my faith journey. I firmly believe I was guided to do this project. It seems every step along the way there's always been a new avenue of opportunity. Whether it be people serving up land such as here, or people donating farm equipment, donating seeds, a hundred plus people who have volunteered to support the project, every twist and turn.

"And it's been a very positive experience for myself, my family, for all the people involved—the recipients. I think all aspects of the project have really benefited quite a lot of people. It's fellowship, mission work, awareness of the existence of hunger. It's a way to give back without costing anything—except time. But there's no greater reward than putting food on someone's table."

Looking at me closely, he asks if I was ready for a tour of the garden and if I would like to pick a pepper or two. "Sure," I say. Not one to pass up a chance for free labor, Chip stops and picks up several large, empty boxes. Again that big smile.

Though the garden looked like any other well-tended one, there was something different. Somehow everything looked better: brighter, juicier, healthier. The green plants were burgeoning with ripe red tomatoes, dark green cucumbers, glossy eggplant and a variety of peppers, including sweet bells and long hots. Chip plunked down a box behind me and I started picking. Before I knew it I had filled two boxes and he had taken off to get more.

As I worked I thought of the people who were going to have what I picked for their dinner that night. It felt good. I looked up at the still sunny sky and I thought, just as Chip had said, "what a beautiful day" indeed!

To become a volunteer, make donations or for more information about Grow-A-Row, call Chip at 908-238-9870 or the Bethlehem Presbyterian Church in Pinetown at 908-755-5753. ♦

Diana Cerrone is an associate editor of Hunterdon County Town & Country Living.

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