2020 will be remembered for many things, among them that this was the year the Community Harvest gleaning program broke all the records.

Community Harvest gleaning coordinator Blakely Browne and American-Corp Summer Associate Claire Seaman have led their band of volunteers to glean an impressive poundage of fresh fruits and vegetables to feed hungry families in the Upper Valley.

“We’ve gleaned over 18,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables so far this year,” said Browne. “That’s worth over $5,000 and, more importantly, it is providing lots of nutritious, healthy food to people in need.”

A total of 46 orchards, farms and backyard gardens have opened their gates to gleaners this summer so far. Susan Curtis runs Hope Mountain Farm in Leavenworth and has been a supporter of the gleaning program for many years.

“Supporting the gleaning program is a win-win for our farm,” Curtis said. “Our partnership with Upper Valley MEND helps fulfill our mission to connect our community with healthy organic produce. Additionally, gleaning crops makes it easier to maintain clean fields, reducing pest and disease pressures.”

Distributing all that goodness is a logistical challenge, but one that Browne and Seaman have found their groove on.

“Claire and I have gotten into a rhythm and have been able to more effectively distribute produce,” said Browne. “We consistently deliver to Mountain Meadows, the Community Cupboard, Plain Pantry Community Action Council, Lighthouse Christian Ministries, Serve Wenatchee, and Hospitality House. It is very satisfying to distribute the food locally. The folks at Mountain Meadows are loving the gleaned goodies.”

Keeping the produce fresh while it is waiting to be distributed is a challenge, but one that will soon be solved. Upper Valley MEND received a $20,000 grant in June for a 14 foot by 11 foot walk-in cooler.

Funding is through the federal government’s CARES Act to support increased capacity for gleaning programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The cooler was installed in the Community Cupboard in August and will become operational once the compressor is installed.

“We hope this walk-in will be able to hold a lot more produce and will be able to distribute it more readily between Plain and Cashmere food banks, as well as through the Cupboard itself,” said Kaylin Bettinger, MEND’s executive director.

Meanwhile, on a much smaller scale, Browne and Seaman took steps to make the fresh produce even more accessible to those in need and moved a fridge outside the Community Cupboard.

“The fridge is stocked daily with fresh fruits and vegetables and seems to be getting good usage, according to Browne. “It has been fun experimenting with the open access fridge at the Cupboard,” Browne said. “It has proven to be quite effective in moving food. People seem to really enjoy the ease of access. It has been lovely to see people coming by and dropping off veggies from their gardens as well. The other day, there was a box of homegrown tomatoes there and the squash is starting to flood in!”