



Victory Gardens: A Salute to Self-sufficiency

Show your patriotism by re-creating your own victory garden for modern times.

By Lisa Kivirist

When you hear the word “patriotic,” what visions jump to mind?

Flags waving; the colors red, white and blue; a Fourth of July parade?

What about fresh spinach greens and carrots ready to harvest right outside your kitchen door—or a bushel of potatoes stored in a basement root cellar, stockpiled for enjoying in the winter?

The victory garden movement was born more than 50 years ago during the World War II era, connecting homegrown produce with homeland security. Back then, 60 percent of Americans actively gardened, harvesting more than eight-million tons of food per year.

A victory garden was a home garden that the average family planted to reduce pressure on the public food supply that was brought on by the war efforts.

Flash forward to today with our rising fuel and food prices. The victory garden movement is experiencing a vibrant renaissance among enthusiastic home gardeners, revitalizing this patriotic call on new, modern, more personal terms.

“There are various reasons for today’s revival of the victory garden,” explains Rose Hayden-Smith, a leading victory-garden historian and scholar based at the University of California.

“In addition to tough economic times, people are increasingly concerned about the overall health of our food system and want to make a direct connection to where their food comes from. People also are looking for a return to community-based living; a time reminiscent of 1943, the peak of the victory gardens, when folks readily exchanged garden abundance and friendship with neighbors.”

Historic Roots

Most images of victory gardens bring to mind the government-led efforts of World War II. Victory gardens, however, actually started during World War I, thanks to citizen- and community-led initiatives.

“The WWI victory garden movement focused on national security through growing food to increase local food production and consumption, freeing up food resources to help Europeans and American soldiers in need of food,” says Hayden-Smith.

“Seeing this positive public response to victory gardens, the United States government formally created a WWII initiative that focused on improving the health of the nation through homegrown produce as a role individual families could play to help the troops abroad.”

From inspiring posters to informational publications distributed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and companies like International Harvester and Beech-Nut, Americans could readily access support and resources to start a victory garden.

“Planting a garden also served as a morale booster for Americans during WWII, as gardeners felt empowered by their contribution,” adds Hayden-Smith.

These collective efforts prompted nearly 20-million Americans to plant victory gardens, which resulted in home gardeners producing about 40 percent of the vegetables consumed nationally. Citizens of other countries also shared this victory garden movement, particularly in Great Britain and Canada.

Despite such a vibrant gardening trend, the victory garden movement generally lost momentum when the troops came home.

“Unfortunately, many people associated victory gardens with deprivation and hard times during the war. They felt liberated to not need to garden anymore,” explains Hayden-Smith. “The decades after WWII brought economic prosperity to



America, and with that, the rise of processed and convenience food, leading our nation even further away from home gardens.”

This trend toward processed food led to a fundamental shift in our country’s agriculture base, from locally-grown, fresh produce to corn-based fast-food with high-fructose corn syrup as a common ingredient.

Since the victory-garden era, our nation’s health has tremendously declined, in part due to our shift away from nutritious fruits and vegetables, resulting in the latest National Center for Health Statistics numbers showing more than two-thirds of Americans as overweight, obese or extremely obese. This revival of home gardening can play an important role in improving our nation’s health.

Victory Gardens of Yore

The return to the victory-garden spirit of self-sufficiency means hobby-farm gardeners today can tap into the World War II concepts for fresh tips on raising home produce.

The War Garden Victorious, by Charles Lathrop, first appeared in print in 1919 and is available free online today, providing both a historic overview and how-to information.

Some victory-garden-era tips to consider include:

Plant a Rainbow

“Victory gardens focused on delivering maximum nutrition value,” explains Pamela Price, a Texas-based victory-garden advocate and blogger.

“Planting a rainbow means including a variety of colors that represent different nutrients, focusing on plants that pack a dense nutritional punch.”

Such vegetables include: Green: broccoli, spinach, Brussels sprouts Red/orange: carrots, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, strawberries, red peppers White: garlic, onions, cauliflower

Click here for a savory recipe for Victory Garden Vegetable Au Gratin>> Consider Dehydration

Victory-garden publications often recommended de-hydration as a method of food preservation. Realizing this was before today’s energy-efficient home chest freezers, dehydration made economic sense, particularly during the World War I victory-garden era when home-garden produce was often shipped overseas to the troops.

Dehydration is also an efficient storage option: It requires less space to store 10 pounds of dried tomatoes than if they were frozen whole.

Thanks to Internet resources today, a variety of solar food-dehydrator building plans can be easily obtained. For minimal material (much of which can be recycled scrap wood) and effort, you can tap into the sun’s free solar energy to dehydrate food.

Dehydration is less labor-intensive than other food-preservation methods, such as canning. No timing of hot water baths—just leave your cleaned, cut produce in the dehydrator on a sunny day and move on to other chores. You’ll return to a harvest of dried bounty.

If you enjoy camping, you can easily take your de-hydrated garden-fresh items with you into the backcountry. Just rehydrate with a little water and add to soups, stews and other cooked dishes.

Value Your Seeds

What’s a garden without seeds? Victory gardens reflect the value in each tiny seed and prioritize using seeds as carefully as possible. Thickly planting seeds was called a “wasteful method” unless they were seeds for something you could readily eat, like salad greens. Plant carefully and according to the recommendations on the packet. Likewise, victory-garden publications recommended saving seeds when possible.

Plan for Success

Victory gardens focused on efficiency: Maximum output for minimum input. Focus on staple crops that grow easily, provide dense nutrition and can be readily stored. In other words, plant what you know will succeed for your growing zone and can easily manage.



Such a mindset addresses a key barrier first-time gardeners encounter: taking on too much, too soon.

“I recommend starting modestly and gradually expanding a home garden,” comments Roger Doiron, a Maine-based home gardener and founder of Kitchen Gardeners International, a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering people to achieve greater levels of food self-reliance through home gardening and cooking.

“The biggest mistake of first-time gardeners is planting beyond their abilities, which leads to frustration, particularly when a crop ripens and needs to be harvested and preserved all at once, like beans.”

Focus on Community

Victory gardens celebrated community ties: sharing knowledge, supplies and extra zucchini. Hundreds of community canning centers brought women together to make the labor-intensive process of canning more efficient.

Not surprisingly, it also yielded friendships and exchanging of tips and ideas. Community also took the form of shared gardens, particularly in urban centers, for people who lacked growing space to plant, weed and harvest together.

Such community-gardening spirit still proves beneficial today, particularly for those of us gardening in rural areas where we can sometimes feel isolated and lonely. Gather your gardening friends for a day of tomato-sauce canning.

Have everyone bring canning jars, lids, pots, tomatoes and other ingredients for their favorite sauce recipe. Establish task stations, such as washing and coring tomatoes, so the work can be divided up and efficiently accomplished.

As the sauce simmers and water baths boil, conversations and connections bloom.

Is your farm near a town where some folks may not have access to a garden plot? This population includes apartment dwellers or those with backyards that may be too shaded or wooded for gardening. Create your own version of a community garden by offering to share space, work and the harvest from your land.