

Wartime Victory Gardens

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The increased interest in backyard gardening has drawn some of its knowledge from the phenomenon of victory gardens. Most of us think of them as a WWII activity, but when I started the research for this article, I found that they actually started in WWI.

As war broke out, men from all over Europe and later the US left their jobs – including agricultural jobs – and joined the military. This left fewer people to run the farms, and production fell. The need to provide resources to troops caused transportation shortages that further impacted the food industry which at the time was dependant on railroads. In Europe battles were fought in agricultural areas, destroying thousands of tons of crops before they could be harvested. Submarines sunk ships sending goods to the bottom of the ocean further exacerbating the problem. Even before we got into the war it became clear that in order to prevent our allies from starving, some of our own production needed to be diverted to overseas markets. Not an easy task as the previous decade in America had seen an unrelated exodus of rural populations to urban areas diminishing the agricultural workforce. What then would happen when we joined the war and our workforce and transportation resources became more stressed as they had in Europe?

One solution was to form a National War Garden Commission. The goal of the Commission was to engage the public in gardening – an activity that would allow them to assist the war effort by raising food close to where it would be consumed. Children, teens and seniors could participate. It was hoped this would increase food production without further stress on the diminished workforce and overburdened transportation industry.

The challenges were pretty immense. These gardens, or victory gardens as they were later called, would need to be in urban areas, not just rural. Communities would need to buy into the effort and urbanites without backyards would need to learn the skills to organize land procurement and labor in order to build community gardens in public spaces. The produce would need to be raised, preserved and stored by people who may not have ever done these activities before. So the Commission began a motivational and educational campaign. They produced posters, slogans, and ‘how to’ publications.

The campaign worked. People grabbed hold of the idea of victory gardens as a way for ordinary people to contribute. Five million gardens were started and by the end of the war they produced over a billion dollars worth of food. When the soldiers came home, life got back to normal and the gardens were abandoned.

However, when WWII broke out similar challenges to food production rose up again and the campaign was restarted. More than 20 million victory gardens were planted over the course of that war producing upwards of 50% of America’s vegetables.

The USDA even made a film to help beginner gardeners get started. I watched it and was fascinated by the very literal use of horsepower in a suburban Maryland backyard. I was also struck by how the film talked about the need to plant a “small” manageable garden which they defined as a quarter acre managed primarily by a grandfather and two teens. You can watch the film on line at http://www.archive.org/details/victory_garden although I strongly urge you to cover your eyes when you get to the out of date pesticide recommendations.

At the close of WWII people again abandoned their victory gardens, but what impresses me the most about this piece of our backyard food production history is how quickly people were able to institute substantial changes in the food system. The way the growing backyard food movement seems to be drawing on the lessons learned from these gardens shows how good ideas can be dusted off and used again.

Information resources used in this article were The War Garden Victorious by Charles Lathrop Pack, Wikipedia, and the USDA film "Victory Gardens".

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