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### American Victory Gardens in World War II

Prior to the United States involvement in World War II, Americans enjoyed a surplus of food supplies. After recovering from the economic hardship of the early 1930's, civilians had become accustomed to well-stocked grocery stores and having money to purchase ample supplies of what they needed. Things would change dramatically with the onset of war and victory gardens would become a testament to the determination and resourcefulness of the American people back home.

The term "victory garden" referred to the contribution their produce made to the war effort, helping to ensure victory over the enemy by providing food supplies at home and to troops abroad. Victory gardens in the United States began on a small scale during World War I. Around 1917, as war dragged on Europe, Americans began to fear potential shortages of food items. In response to this, community gardens were formed independently by various private and public organizations to provide urban families a method of offsetting food shortages. Without any centralized leadership and because the government never initiated the rationing of food supplies during this war, this early victory garden movement faded quickly at the close of World War I (Tucker 134-135).

From 1940-1945, Claude Wickard held the position of Secretary of the US Department of Agriculture. Initially, he was not in support of bringing back the victory garden movement. Due to the meager output and disorganized nature of World War I victory gardens, Wickard believed that no substantial amount of food could be produced by gardening novices living in urban or suburban areas. This resistance was exemplified when the Department of Agriculture, under

Wickard's leadership, advised Eleanor Roosevelt that no site on the White House grounds would be suitable for a vegetable garden (Tucker 134-135).

Despite this early government hesitation, the victory garden movement was gaining ground in the US. In 1942, Burpee Seed Company began selling "Victory Garden Seed Packets", available in various quantities depending on the garden size. During this time, Rockefeller Center removed ornamental garden spaces and converted them to vegetable garden demonstration areas. Gardening was becoming a way for civilians in the United States to feel they were making a contribution towards the war effort, as well as a place for them to work out anxiety over the war (Tucker 135).

As the United States became more involved in World War II, Wickard and the US Department of Agriculture eventually acknowledged there was a need for amateur gardeners to assist in food production and began to officially promote the victory garden movement. The US Department of Agriculture issued a technical and somewhat authoritarian booklet in 1942 called Victory Gardens, which stated:

There is now a real need for civilians to relieve the burden on commercial food sources, transportation, and preservation by growing all food that is practical at home and preserving, storing, and using it over as much of the year as possible.

(Boswell 3)

This publication had very formal tone and included detailed charts and instructions on ideal seed planting times, home storage tips, tool care, effective watering techniques, mulching benefits, and other gardening practices. The US Department of Agriculture began a campaign to recruit 18 million American Victory Gardens, which was accompanied by additional printed manuals, video demonstrations and poster propaganda.

During WWII, Judge Marvin Jones was acting as War Food Administrator under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and began to aggressively organize food production and civilian rationing. Jones' responsibility was to ensure commercial food production remained high and civilian rationing continued in order to provide enough supplies to support US troops and Allied forces. He issued several statements, met with the American Farm Bureau regularly, and occasionally appeared on national television to speak directly to civilians (Jones 10-135).

On January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1943, Jones issued a letter from the War Food Administration, entitled "Food and Farming in 1943." In this letter he warned that in 1943 civilians could expect supplies of canned vegetables to be 75% of the quantities consumed in the previous year. In an effort to soften this disappointing news, he reminded Americans that this level was actually still higher than what was consumed in 1935-1939. Since that time though, civilians had become accustomed to a healthier economy that allowed them more freedom as consumers and thus would need to brace themselves for a challenging year (Jones 63).

Jones went on to share some results from the past year's effort to maintain maximum food production on farms and with victory gardens. He reflected that the government had asked for 18 million victory gardens and applauded American civilians for providing 20 million instead. Jones stated that these gardens produced 8 million tons of food supplies, which added up to an astounding 40% of all vegetables grown for consumption in the United States in 1942 (Jones 72). With these clear marks of success, it would be later this year when Eleanor Roosevelt famously installed a victory garden on the White House grounds, despite Wickard's earlier discouragement (Tucker 135).

This same year, as expanded rationing loomed on the horizon, the US Department of Agriculture issued a booklet entitled Victory Garden: Leader's Handbook. Unlike the 1942

Victory Garden booklet, this new manual was written in plain language intended for the novice gardener and explained in an approachable manner how to begin a victory garden. The handbook began:

People who have always relied largely on canned food now realize their canned foods ration allotment will not feed their families, and that the fresh vegetables their grocer is able to get will often call short of demand... About 18 million families this year will meet the situation by growing Victory Gardens. (US Department of Agriculture 1)

The handbook included cartoons and illustrations as well featuring families working together for the greater good. It also featured the popular slogan “Every successful Victory Garden is a blow to the enemy” (US Department of Agriculture 11).

Another slogan, “Grow More in ‘44”, further popularized the Victory Garden movement as Jones’ rallied for 22 million victory gardens to be grown. During this year, US food production increased another 5%, bringing the total to a record 37% above prewar production (Jones 135).

As World War II at last came to a close, the pressure of international obligation began to ease. Similar to the close of World War I, many of the victory gardens began to fade away. However, this time seed sales did not dramatically decline. By the early 1950’s, there were still 17 million gardeners still active in the US. Of non-farming families, 33% continued to grow a garden. Gardening also remained one of the most popular leisure activities in post-war America (Tucker 139).

Today there is no doubt that victory gardens contributed to the success of the US and Allied troops in World War II. The food produced by victory gardens enabled ample supplies to

be available to troops overseas and to families back home, offsetting the burden of food rationing. Victory gardens provided civilians with a way to contribute to the war effort and find a positive and constructive outlet for their anxiety over the war. Even prior to the official promotion of these gardens by the US government, civilians themselves were already organizing the victory garden movement. As government support came and went, the level of urgency and dire need diminished, but victory gardens remain a powerful symbol of American resourcefulness and community activism in times of need.

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