

Victory Gardens

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Battle rising food and fuel prices by growing some of your own produce.

Henry Ford once said that “No unemployment insurance can be compared to an alliance between man and a plot of land.”

His words continue to ring true today, when a shaky economy has combined with rising costs for food and the gas it takes to get to the grocery store. Both are affecting how much American families can afford to pay for their “daily bread,” causing them to rethink what it takes to put food on the table and whether they should try supplementing their meals with produce they’ve grown themselves.

Periodically there’s a resurgence in the interest to produce one’s own food. Perhaps you recall one of the “back to the land” movements, a major one from the 1960s and 1970s. Often these trends come from the ground up, meaning that a group of people respond to something they view as problematic; for example, an unwillingness to buy produce grown with pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Or, supporting local growers becomes important to them.

Perhaps you remember a public television program called “The Victory Garden.” It began as a vegetable garden show, then evolved in the 1980s and 1990s to include all aspects of gardening and even cooking from the garden until it was finally cancelled in the early 2000s.

One such trend began in the 1940s during World War II, when the government encouraged people to grow their own food, even on publicly owned land, because there was such a food shortage because of the war. Canned foods were on the list of rationed items; the government suggested that stateside citizens should grow their own food to save the canned goods for the troops fighting the war. Hence, these vegetable gardens were “winning the war” or being grown for victory. It was patriotic to grow one’s own food. The government helped supply seeds and other items to get the gardens started. In fact, WWII was the second major effort for producing food at home. “War gardens” were grown during WWI, largely for the same reason: It’s economical to grow produce in a backyard garden.

With so many countries at war, national leaders asked their citizens to help. People bought bonds, conserved raw materials, recycled, rallied the troops, volunteered to serve and planted Victory Gardens. In 1942 the Canadian government was skeptical of the U.S. Victory Garden campaign. The position of the department of agriculture was that a home garden was an inefficient use of space, fertilizer, soil and so on.

By 1943, however, the minister of the department had a change of heart around the time a Vancouver newspaper reported that there were more than 200,000 Victory Gardens across Canada and that they produced an average of 550 lbs. of vegetables each. Eventually Victory Gardens were grown in every shape and size. They were promoted by governments and corporations. Rural and urban populations banded together in this effort to work the soil and raise food for families, friends, and neighbors to support the war by allowing more supplies to be shipped to Allied troops around the world.

During WWII, magazines supported the gardening effort. Assuming their readership knew nothing about gardening, they published articles on what steps to take for starting a garden, which seeds to plant, soil fertility, pest identification and weeds. The most common plants suggested were beans, beets, carrots, corn, parsnips, peas, lettuces, radishes, leeks, turnips, cabbage, brussels sprouts, broccoli, kohlrabi, tomatoes, rutabagas, cauliflower, summer squash and more. Gardening became a family or community effort. Then, it was a pastime and a national duty.

After the war ended, the government also ended the call for people to produce their own food. Unfortunately agriculture was not yet up to full production so there were still food shortages. The agriculture industry responded quickly to the shortage by mechanizing and applying petrochemicals. This was the genesis of modern agriculture, which has served us well for a long time.

For some people, however, recent high fuel prices are affecting how much they can afford at the grocery store. Perhaps some have to give up certain items as prices increase. During tough times it is good to have a little insurance, such as knowing how to augment your grocery bill by producing some of your own food. Even if you have just a little space, many fruits and vegetables can be grown in containers on a sunny porch or deck.

As the economy wobbles, the experiences and knowledge of our forbearers on how to get by on what we have may be a reasonable strategy until the next growth period comes along. There are valuable lessons from the past on how to make it through hard times. Perhaps now is a good time to grow your very own Victory Garden, starting with the tried-and-true plants that were reliable in years past. Perhaps it's time to declare victory over hard times!