

Gardening and American Nationalism during World War II

The Home Front Fight for Food

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the Victory Garden movement in the US during World War II. Victory Gardens were not a new idea for the American public. The gardening movement as subsistence for the home front had been implemented during World War I as "War Gardens" by the government. Victory Gardens emerged throughout the US after the attack on Pearl Harbor, but the Department of Agriculture did not immediately implement the order for all citizens to have Victory Gardens until 1943. The government feared food shortages due to labor shortage and Americans caught onto the gardening bug when canned goods started to be rationed. Victory Gardening hit an all-time high in 1943, and with the end of the war the gardening effort sloughed off, despite the government warning of continued food rationing and possible shortages. Victory Gardens brought about a new sense of participation in the war effort, and also gave people a place to work out their nervousness from the stress of the war. The imagery of ads, government pamphlets and newspaper articles of the time reveal that all members of families were involved in Victory Gardening. These ads show happy people working and planting seeds to create their own food in order to have enough to eat for any lean months ahead. This essay will explore the roles of the family members in the Victory Garden movement and the larger picture of government action in providing food for the American public during wartime. The success of the Victory Garden movement showed that Americans of the time were interested in helping with the war effort, specifically doing more proactive work to become self-sufficient. These home front actions, therefore, helped to take pressure off the government of providing food for the American people and the focus of the government can then be on providing for the needs of the armies. The primary sources for this essay will be primarily images, newspaper articles, and governmental ads from the period showing the people working in their gardens and talking about the effort at home. By also using governmental pamphlets from the era, which talk specifically about how to set up a garden and how to maintain it, these sources show how the government helped administer the victory garden program.

Gardening and American Nationalism during World War II

20th century Americans often envisioned the United States as a place where dreams came true with hard work and some luck. When America fell on hard times, such as during the Great Depression in the 1930s, many Americans still believed that they could pull themselves up by their bootstraps and with some hard work and a little luck, they could put the nation back on the road to recovery. This identity did not change during World War II, instead it was shaped by a new experience: an attack on American soil. With the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Americans now faced an identity crisis. How do you come away with a sense of nationalism and strength when facing a World War? Claude Wickard, the Secretary of Agriculture under FDR, tapped into the American ideals of hard work, self-sufficiency and independence when he put into place various farm and Victory Garden programs. The Victory Garden program was a gardening effort under the guidance of the federal government to set up gardens in local areas that then provided fresh fruits and vegetables to the gardeners. The government was then able to use the produce that the gardeners would have purchased, and they were able to send the excess food to troops and people affected by the war. These programs gave ordinary Americans a chance to help with the war effort and become part of the war effort.

The Victory Garden program gave Americans control over their own food supplies and a place to work out the stress and nerves of the war going on around them; however, it also provided the government with an opportunity to reinforce national identity, by re-envisioning what it meant to be a patriotic American and what role ordinary citizens could play during a national crisis. The Victory Garden program also re-envisioned the role of women in the home. While Rosie the Riveter emphasized the important role women occupied in the wartime work force, government food policies re-enforced the idea that women should be canning in the home, not working out in the world. My paper argues that Victory Gardens made American citizens feel patriotic by allowing them to do their duty by growing their own food. These Victory Gardens also re-envisioned what Americans should, or could do during war time. Victory Gardens helped to shape gender identities by reinforcing the importance of women in the home, revealing that conflicting propaganda regarding women's proper roles in wartime were in circulation throughout World War II.

The War Garden movement during World War I was a gardening program where gardens were planted in parks, parking lots, and other public areas. The program was citizen run with little organization from the government. After 1917, food prices rocketed as people hoarded food in

fear of food shortages due to the war. Food strikes were common, and people looked to the government to help with the out of control prices. As a way of counter-acting food hoarding and overbuying of supplies, the War Gardens movement was started. By having people plant gardens and harvest their own crops, food would then be more accessible, and people could use what they could grow.

¹ The government was not as successful in the beginning at getting the word out about the new gardening program, and ended up losing control over the program to a “wealthy New Jersey Lumberman, Charles Lathrop Pack.”² Pack used food riots in New York as a way of jump starting his program and he created his own private “National Emergency Food Garden Commission to promote back yard and vacant lot gardening across America...”³ Pack used his commission as way of controlling the advertising about the War Garden program. He advertised gardening with slogans like “War Gardens over the Top,”⁴ “Every War Garden a Peace Plant,”⁵ and “What are YOU doing? The Kaiser is Canned-Can Food.”⁶ The ads showed Americans could use gardens as a way of supplementing the over-priced food that was available, but also help the war effort as well. “His commission became a propaganda agency seeking to persuade Americans that taking up the garden hoe could be as patriotic a duty as bearing a rifle.”⁷

Pack’s efforts showed what type of effort could be made by private industry to help Americans during wartime. The problem with this was that Pack put the Department of Agriculture to shame for not doing a better job of creating and energizing the War Garden Movement. “This private Agency propagandized so energetically and resourcefully that the Department of Agriculture resented being elbowed aside as the gardening authority in the national capital.”⁸ President Wilson did not like Pack taking control of War Gardens, so he went to work with Herbert Hoover, who Wilson put in charge of the Department of Agriculture as Food Administrator, to propagandize the War Garden movement themselves.

¹ David M. Tucker, *Kitchen Gardening In America: A History* (Ames Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1993). 123.

² Ibid., 124.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Charles Lathrop Pack, *The War Garden Victorious* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1919). 13.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁷ Tucker, *Kitchen Gardening In America: A History*: 124.

⁸ Ibid.

Gardening and American Nationalism during World War II

“To further propagandize the nation for the war effort, Wilson created a committee on Public information run by advertising executives whose artists, speakers, and sales people assisted the Agriculture Department in a War Garden Campaign to plant a million new backyard and vacant lot gardens.”⁹ Between the two entities the War Garden program was successful, or at least we think so. Neither group really kept track of the amount of gardens in America at the time and only used facts and figures as propaganda.

The gardening movement during World War I showed that gardening could be used for more than just food, and as itself a patriotic movement. At the end of the war Pack published *The War Garden Victorious*, in which he argued: “The changed conditions brought into being by the signing of the armistice caused the National War Garden Commission to continue its work with increased earnestness in 1919. The armistice caused hostilities to be suspended; however, it did not increase the food supply nor feed the hungry. The world’s new demand for food made it imperative that the Victory Gardens meet and surpass the record of the war gardens.”¹⁰ The Victory Garden was then born from the idea of being patriotic by helping to feeding the starving of Europe during the post-war period, in this American identity would be re-envisioned during World War II as a way not only of feeding the world’s hungry, but also helping the American people to feed themselves.

The Victory Garden movement during World War II started in 1941. Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard, waited twelve days after the attack on Pearl Harbor before he made any move to implement the gardening movement or other emergency food preparations. The earliest mention of the term: “Victory Gardens” was in the *Wall Street Journal*. On Jan 12, 1942 The Office of Civilian Defense announced that it is “preparing a victory garden program ... The purpose of the program is to sponsor in every community, victory gardens...produce from gardens managed and worked as community undertakings, as well as surpluses from home gardens, could be used for school lunch projects and emergency food needs.”¹¹ The government was planning on a program to help Americans garden; however, did not want to rush into giving

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Pack, *The War Garden Victorious*: 114.

¹¹ "O.C.D. Wants Civilians to Start "Victory Gardens"," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 January 1942, 6.

Americans a plan that would be too hard to follow, or would create much waste.

Wickard started with a panel discussion and conference with the major horticultural societies in the U.S. before he decided which course of action to take with the gardening movement. "We need to proceed carefully and with full consideration of all the factors involved...I do not think the nation will benefit at present from a wide-spread all-out campaign intended to put a vegetable garden in every city backyard or on every vacant lot."¹² Wickard made reference here to the previous World War and to the program established by Pack. Wickard and the Department of Agriculture remembered being pushed aside during World War I and the Victory Garden Movement of World War II was built with the idea of trying to contain the program to just the control of the government. The government knew the chaos that could happen from running a program only partially, and Wickard wanted to make sure this was a successful program.

Wickard produced the first pamphlet for Victory Gardens in early 1942; the pamphlet was meant for the more experienced gardener or farmer, not for the novice gardener starting out. The pamphlet cautions: "It is wasteful... to attempt gardening in cramped, poorly drained, poorly lighted spots in the heart of a city or in most highly developed industrial neighborhoods or within the branch or root spread of large trees...Perhaps the worst waste among gardeners has resulted from neglect and abandonment of gardens planted in a flush of enthusiasm but without adequate means or will to carry each crop through to harvest."¹³ The Agriculture and War departments did not want to see any man power or other resources go to waste. By discouraging citizens from planting anywhere they wanted, the government was able to stop overeager novice gardeners. The government was also then able to take more time to put together a much better and clearer program while at the same time by publishing the 1942 pamphlet demonstrating that they wanted a gardening program in place.

The official announcement for an all-out national Victory Garden program was not made until January of 1943. In a statement in January 1943, Wickard maintained that Victory Gardens were a "legitimate and

¹² "Wickard Sets Plan for Home Gardens," *New York Times*, 20 December 1941, 22.

¹³ Victor Boswell, *Victory Gardens*, Miscellaneous Publication 483 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1942). 3.

Gardening and American Nationalism during World War II

vital effort of war production. He appealed to any citizen with ground enough to join in the 1943 Victory Garden Program...and that any citizen can make a worth-while contribution to the Nations' food supply by growing a home vegetable garden."¹⁴ Around the same time of the announcement, Wickard issued pamphlets and other literature along with films and other media to make sure that all Victory Gardens would be created with the governments' purpose of being successful in mind. With the official pamphlets released, the job of each citizen was now to support the program as best as he or she could.

Wickard wanted the program to run smoothly with every gardener trained so that valuable resources would not be wasted. Wickard also didn't want to waste Americans' time with gardening if they could be working in other wartime jobs. Wickard wanted the program to be successful and also smart. "...There are already extensive farm, home, community and school garden programs being carried on throughout the country by government agencies, and these programs will be expanded."¹⁵ By recognizing the programs already in place, Wickard was able to work in tandem with these agencies to create a new program that could be implemented at the same time. The new Victory Garden programs worked with the community leadership already in place. This created a checks and balances system, whereby the program was run on the local level, but propaganda and instructions were from a national office.

This re-inventing of the Victory Gardener caused a reinvigoration of working the land and citizens asking what they could do to help on the home front. Women in particular were overwhelmed by ads during WWII that stressed what a patriotic woman should be doing for society. A single girl could join the W.A.V.E.S. or other groups designed to have women helping in the war effort itself, but on the home front there were problems concerning lack of labor. Farmers were watching crops rotting on the vine or in the fields from the lack of labor that was available to help harvest the crops. "Between April 1940 and July 1942 more than two million men left the farm, and by the end of the war, the agricultural population had decreased by six million."¹⁶ However, having women helping in the fields was not an unproblematic solution. "In a hearing before a House subcommittee of the Committee of Appropriations in

¹⁴ "Wickard Sets Plan for Home Gardens," 1.

¹⁵ "Guide for Planning the Local Victory Garden Program," (Washington, DC The United States Office of Civilian Defense & United States Department of Agriculture, 1942), 3.

¹⁶ Stephanie Ann Carpenter, "Regular Farm Girl: The Women's Land Army in World War II," *Agricultural History* 71, no. 2 (1997): 164.

February 1943, Wickard testified on the labor problem the Department of Agriculture expected for 1943: two hundred thousand fewer workers on farms...The national agricultural establishment, including farm organizations and state officials, did not believe that employing women workers on American farms would make a great difference to the war effort.”¹⁷ The House subcommittee on the lack of laborers for farmers tried to have students and other groups work with the farmers before they even wanted to talk about women working on farms. Moreover, before city women were asked to volunteer, the committees still wanted only women who had previously done farm work to help on the struggling farms. The government finally established the “Emergency Farm Labor Program in which convicts, high school students, imported workers, military personnel, prisoners- of-war, and women made up the farm labor force.”¹⁸ The Women’s Land Army was created and women went to work and like their counter parts in the war factories around the country, found training and picked up skills that they did not have previous experience with, but were able to flourish in their new jobs.

This was not the first Women’s Land Army in America. During World War I a private group, like the War Garden Commission, was set up for women to start a Land Army. The success of the previous Women’s Land Army did help when the group was set up during World War II. Also following suit with British women engaged in a similar enterprise, young American women were put up on farms for time periods of two weeks or the entire summer. They learned to harvest and to plant crops in order to fill in for missing male farm laborers.

An investigation done by the *New York Times* entitled “At the Front with Our Land Army,” reported that girls were taking positions with the Women’s Land Army for patriotic reasons. “The farmers are learning that women can hold their own except in heavy jobs.”¹⁹ The propaganda for the Women’s Land Army consisted of posters that said “Pitch in and Help!”²⁰ and “Harvest war crops.”²¹ This propaganda helped to get more women onto farms and thus doing their part to help with American food self-sufficiency. The propaganda for the WLA used the idea of a woman’s

¹⁷ Ibid., 172 - 73.

¹⁸ Ibid., 164.

¹⁹ "At the Front with Our Land Army," *New York Times*, 4 July 1943, SM12.

²⁰ Office of War Information, *Pitch in and Help. Join the Women’s Land Army*, ca. 1941 - 1945. Office for Emergency Management.

²¹ Office of War Information, *Harvest war crops*, ca. 1941 - 1945. Office of Emergency Management.

Gardening and American Nationalism during World War II

patriotic identity as a way to create interest in the project, just as Rosie the Riveter had been used as propaganda for women to work in war factories. The propaganda for the WLA worked to create a sense of urgent need, focusing on the ways in which farming helped the country to win the war, and women's roles in this effort.

Women that were unable to leave home to help the WLA and farms did their part for their families and communities. Specific tasks that were promoted to patriotic housewives included working in the family Victory Garden and preserving that harvest. The average housewife, even if she could not harvest the nation's crops, could grow her own Victory Garden. The pamphlets and brochures of the Victory Garden program were very specific about what to grow, how to grow it and when to harvest. These same brochures explained how incorporating more vegetables into the American diet would help to build a stronger America. "Vegetables and fruits from these gardens will make a real contribution to the total civilian food supply, especially of those vital elements- the vitamins and minerals needed for sustained well-being."²² Along with planting and caring for the garden, housewives were then encouraged to process and preserve the harvest and learn how to use these canned foods in healthy meals for American families. With the ever increasing demand for resources for the military, women became the preservers of food for the home, thus freeing up food supply for the soldiers abroad.

Old fashioned canning bees were set up, with extra sugar rations given to those that were canning, and ad campaigns were created to show women the importance of canning their own food.²³ Some of the ads and slogans directed towards the women canning their harvests were "Of Course I can" and "We'll have lots to eat this winter..."²⁴ These ads showed women the importance of preserving the food they were getting from their gardens and also that by creating their own foods, these women were then able to save their rationing points for other things that they might need later. For the government, these canning women and the Victory Gardeners helped to create additional food resources and thus remove the burden from the government of having to provide food for the civilian population. The 1943 Victory Garden Program pamphlet says: "Victory

²² H.W. Hochbaum, *The 1943 Victory Garden Program* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture Committee on Victory Gardens, 1943). 1.

²³ Alfred Parker, *We'll have lots to eat this winter, won't we mother? : grow your own, can your own ; Grow your own, can your own* 1943. Office of War Information.

²⁴ Dick Williams, *Of course I can! : I'm patriotic as can be-- and ration points won't worry me!*, 1944. United States War Food Administration.

Gardeners can help in many ways to meet the wartime food production problem....the Victory Gardener can have his vegetables and fruits right at his doorstep, and on his pantry shelves and in his cellar. Thereby, he and his family will find it easier to maintain food habits so essential to health.”²⁵ Victory Gardening was seen as not just good for the nation, but also good for the health and wellbeing of the person gardening.

Victory Gardens gave ordinary American citizens a part to play in the war effort. Single women were used as farm laborers for the first time, and provided them with the opportunity to contribute to the feeding of the nation’s families, even if they did not yet have their own families to raise and nurture. At the same time, housewives were told to stay home and can the food they harvested from their Victory Gardens, turning the traditional role of housewife into a national and patriotic duty. Victory Gardens allowed American citizens to feel patriotic in doing their duty to grow their own food thus allowing them to play a more significant role during wartime than they had previously. Significantly, Victory Gardens also provided housewives not employed in munitions work an important and patriotic role to play that enhanced their identities as good women and good citizens.

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This paper was presented at the spring 2014 regional Phi Alpha Theta conference at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

²⁵ Hochbaum, *The 1943 Victory Garden Program*: 1.

Gardening and American Nationalism during World War II

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