

VICTORY GARDENS AND WHY THEY ARE IMPORTANT TODAY

Dolly Foster Horticulturist; dfoster@olparks.com

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Victory Gardens were an important civic project that began during WWI. By 1916 it was clear to the US government that our allies in Europe needed food. Much of the farmland in Europe, especially in France had been devastated by the fighting and trench warfare. The US government made a commitment to help. In 1917 the National War Garden Commission was formed with Charles Lathrop Pack at the helm. Their job was to get America gardening at home to support themselves as a form of patriotic duty. This would be a great contribution to the war effort as the government was sending food to Europe and setting aside food for the US military.

During WWI not only was the National War Garden Commission formed to popularize gardening to Americans. The Woman's Land Army of America and the United States School Garden Army were mobilized to help get agriculture labor where it was need for both public and private growing. Priorities of this movement included home gardening, conservation and canning to conserve resources and feed Americans. Conservation, living simply and volunteering were all ways Herbert Hoover, head of the US Food Administration encouraged Americans to contribute to the war effort. It worked so well that there was no rationing during WWI. They dubbed this "Hooverizing"

After WWI Victory Gardens continued for a time in the US and Europe in order to avoid famine. They then fell out of fashion until WWII. At the beginning of the US involvement in WWII food rationing and the rationing of other commercial products began. Gardens were promoted all over the US by posters, pamphlets, news articles and news reels in the theatres.

During WWII labor and transportation shortages made it difficult to move produce to market. Items that were rationed during this time included sugar, cheese, milk, meat, coffee, eggs and chocolate. The plan was for the citizens to grow the vegetables while farmers concentrated on wheat and corn.

Millions of Americans helped the war effort by turning their front yards and back yards into what we call today, urban farms. Empty land and lots in cities and neighborhoods were utilized as well as school and church land. Rooftops in big cities were used for container growing and employers with land attached to their facilities allowed staff to grow on company property. At the height of the movement in 1945 there were an estimated 20 million gardens that produced 40% of the US produce. An amazing feat.

Gardeners pooled their resources and talents by growing different types of produce and forming neighborhood cooperatives to share the harvest. Excess produce was expected to be stored and canned for winter. The US Government provided pamphlets to direct gardeners on all aspects of growing, storage and canning.

Why is this important to us now, today in 2020? Our country as well as 30% of the world's population is at the end of a 2-month lockdown because of Covid-19. States may be reopening at his point (early May 2020) but it does not mean that shortages and lockdowns are over. The likelihood of serious food shortages is low but it could happen. We could also have another lockdown later in the year. Frankly we are not completely safe until we have a vaccine. I am not trying to be alarmist just honest. Fears of food insecurity are real for many families and visits to food banks are on the rise. Growing a percentage of your own fresh produce is a way to help your family get through a tough time. Whether your family is 2 people or 10, growing your own food is enjoyable work and a way for the whole family to contribute to the wellbeing of it.

How do you start a vegetable garden from scratch? It really is not very hard. If you have the idea that you need to tear out your whole yard to do this, you don't. In fact you need to start small. Vegetable gardening is an ever-evolving skill and every season is different. With a little information you can get started this year and hopefully expand your garden in the years to come.

First, if you are thinking about doing this in your front yard, please contact your city ordinance office and make sure your garden will be legal. If you happen to live in an HOA, same thing. See what their ordinances are for gardening. For

something this important, better to be upfront than asking for forgiveness later and paying fines.

Second, there are many ways to successfully garden vegetables. What I have provided here are just the basics. Experiment, find what works for you and if it works, stick with that method.

Once you decide the general area of the garden, I have 10 steps you can follow to make sure you have everything covered.

- 1) **Site Selection:** your garden is going to need as much sunshine as possible, 6 hours+.
- 2) **Choose a convenient location:** Your garden needs to be placed as conveniently near your water hose as possible. True you can run 200 feet of hose out to the back of your yard but if the watering and weeding are not convenient and close=convenient, you will be less likely to pop out the garden to check on it daily. Daily, yes. A vegetable garden needs to be tended daily. You won't have hours of work every day. In fact, if you look in on the garden daily you will have only a few minutes of work watering, monitoring pests before they get out of hand, and weeding.
- 3) **Build the garden:** Here is where you need to make choices. Will you grow in the ground, a raised bed or containers? I think it depends how deep you want to get into this. If you just want a few tomato and pepper plants then I would go with large pots. Do you want to supplement 20% of your fresh produce? I would build a few raised beds. A 4'x8' or 3'x6' bed is a good place to start. A 10" or 8" tall bed is deep enough to grow anything you want, including tomatoes. Boards come in 10" and 8" at the lumber store. If you are devoted and think you want to get most of your fresh produce from your home garden then taking out the lawn may be the way to go. However, this can also be achieved with raised beds. I won't go into all the specifics here because this is meant to be a brief list to inspire you to look for more information. I will put several links to YouTube videos that offer great instruction at the end of this article.
One comment about raised beds. They can be constructed and placed right over turf, lined with layers of cardboard or landscape fabric to kill the turf then filled. No digging of turf necessary. All beds and containers should be filled with a mixture of compost (60%) and soil (40%). This will keep the soil draining well and the weeds will be minimal. Do not fill with 100% black/ top soil.
- 4) **Plant the garden:** The most important part of choosing plants for your garden is to start simple the first year. Plant only types of vegetables your family will eat. If no one eats cucumbers, don't plant them. You can experiment in the seasons to come. At this point in the season, most plants will be planted as transplants instead of seeds. You can plant a vegetable garden through the second week of June and still get a decent harvest. When you go to plant your vegetables mix a little granular fertilizer into the soil. This will help your plants get off to a good start. Plan on fertilizing every 10 days to 2 weeks until late August to keep your plants producing. I like liquid organic fertilizers.
- 5) **Watering:** Mulching your garden can help with conserving moisture in the garden. Gardens can be mulched with hardwood mulch (No Colored Mulch!!), straw or newspaper. Grass clippings can also be used as mulch as long as there are no pesticides on it. Fertilizer in the grass clippings is ok.
Watering will be done 2-3 times a week deeply rather than daily and shallow. This gets the roots growing deeper into the garden soil which in turn helps them survive hot weather later in the summer. Water the soil not the leaves of your plants! This helps prevent leaf diseases and is especially important if afternoon will be the time you water most.
- 6) **Support and vertical growing:** Plants like tomatoes, pole beans(green, snap or dry), small squash and cucumbers can be grown vertically to maximize space in your garden and get the most out of your plants. There are many ways to achieve this. One comment on tomato cages. The small ones are meant for peppers and eggplants. For your tomatoes, buy the largest/ sturdiest cages you can afford. Sink them in the ground so the first ring is buried.
- 7) **Harvesting:** This can be easy or tricky. When I was learning how to garden it was a little tricky. Find an experienced garden friend if you can. It is always good to have someone to bounce ideas off and get a little advice. If that is not possible, just practice. Pay attention to your seed packages and plant tags that come with

your plants. There will be information there about days to harvest. That means days from when you plant it in the ground. If there is no info on the tag, then google the plant variety name you will get loads of information. Start a small notebook to keep track of this information, i.e. when you harvested the first time and how it tasted. All this info will help you learn until it becomes second nature. In general, when a vegetable on your plants looks similar in size to a piece of produce at the grocery or farmer's market then you are probably ok to harvest. If you pick beans, tomatoes, squash, and cucumbers on a regular basis they will keep producing.

- 8) **Pests:** A lot of gardeners who start their own gardens do so because they want fresh, organic produce to reduce their exposure to pesticides. All gardens have pests at some point. If you garden organically and plant flowers to attract beneficial insects that eat the pests then you are on a good path. Look into alternatives of commercial pesticides. Pick bugs off your plants. Look into cultural (growing) methods that can help you avoid using chemicals. Sanitation in the garden is very important to reducing plant diseases. This means pruning some of your plants to make sure there is good air circulation in between them. Pruning also makes room for pollinators to get in there and pollinate your plants which results in more vegetables.
- 9) **Weeds:** Weeds rob your plants of water and nutrients. Weed your garden regularly. The more often you pull tiny weeds, the less huge seed-laden weeds you will have to fight later in the season. Mulch helps control weeds too.
- 10) **Clean up your garden in the fall!** Remove all the garden plants in fall. This is a good sanitation practice to prevent leaf diseases harboring in the soil over winter. It also keeps your garden looking neat and tidy.

Tips for Success!

Tomatoes: Water consistently to prevent blossom end rot. Blossom end rot will destroy your fruit. The most important thing is to understand the difference between overwatering and consistent. Watering everyday for 20 minutes on each plant is overwatering. However, water regularly so your plant does not wilt and then must be drowned to revive it. Blossom end rot involves a problem with calcium uptake by the plant. You most likely do not have a calcium deficiency in your garden soil if you are fertilizing with an organic fertilizer. Rather, the problem is with the plant drying out and being drowned to revive it. The calcium is not absorbed properly and results in the bottom of the tomato turning black while the top looks totally normal.

There are two categories of tomatoes: Indeterminant and Determinant.

Indeterminant plants grow throughout the whole season. We often call this a tomato vine. It will grow until the cold kills it or you remove it in the fall. It also tries to produce fruit until it dies. This type of tomato will require strong tall support. Not many tomato cages can handle a big vine like this.

Determinate tomatoes are the opposite. They grow to a predetermined size, flower, and fruit almost all at once. A common tomato we think of in this example is the Roma. This is the tomato that most sauces are made of. For kitchen gardeners the fruit ripening all at one time is convenient for making and canning sauce. A large sturdy tomato cage will be appropriate for this plant.

Potatoes: potatoes can take up a lot of space. Growing them in grow bag/ potato bag is a great way to save space. This is a special type of fabric container meant to grow potatoes and vegetables. It will hold potting soil and compost and a few seed potatoes; you will harvest about 10 pounds out of it at the end of the season. Just follow the directions on the bag.

Plant hybrid varieties for the first couple of seasons. I want to clarify that hybrids are not commercial GMO varieties of seed. GMO is not nor has it ever been available to the home gardener. All seed companies say GMO Free on their seed packets, but they really don't need to because it is against the law to sell GMO seed to home gardeners. F1 Hybrids on the other hand are hybridized plants that are bred for taste and disease resistance. I think starting with these will help you start out gardening on the right foot. You can learn how to garden without having to deal with a lot of problems heirloom varieties have. You won't want to save seed from these vegetables because they won't taste like the ones from the plant you grew. They will revert. Which brings me to heirloom varieties. These varieties of vegetables and flowers have been around for decades, sometimes centuries. These plants are open pollinated, and you can save the seed from

them. They don't always have the best disease resistance, but they have persisted so long because of their taste. In my opinion totally worth it.

Prune your veg plants! Yes prune your plants, make sure there is good air flow between them. Prevents disease and saves space. See the videos below.

The Health Benefits of Gardening

Gardening is a great activity to add to your life (if you have not done so already). It encourages people to participate in activities that promote wellness. On a whole, gardeners consume more fruits and vegetables than nongardeners. Homegrown organic produce is fresher and can be packed with more nutrients.

When you choose to garden organically, you reduce your exposure to pesticides. The same goes for organic turf and flower growing. An important endeavor for sure.

The best thing about gardening is the benefit to our mental health. It reduces stress by reducing the hormone cortisol (the stress hormone). Gardening gets you out in the sunshine and helps build up vitamin D in the body. This helps to fight the blues. Gardening gets you outside digging in the earth and exposes you to beneficial bacteria and fungi. Finally, gardening gets you out and focusing your energy on this pleasant activity and helps you fight off the stressors in your everyday life. Good luck in your garden this summer! Enjoy it!

Resources:

Victory Gardens: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bf1Cnremoxg>

Raised Bed Garden Mistakes (to avoid) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cPi3ixNF-Y>

Building a raised garden bed: Roots & Refuge Farm: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MG7DXzkD7s>

Raised Bed and Square Foot Gardening: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PlYi95Umebk>

Building a Raised Garden for Beginners: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1N5faRpRfo4>

Pruning Vegetables:

Tomatoes! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmKK136KH7Y&t=535s>

Zucchini! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqkpifoEUfc>

Tomatoes:

Tying up Tomato plants: Single stem method- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceKXPVKIWRl>

Cattle Panel method: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tt2rp293rl>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYqXhrykl-k>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5e4wf-QtUo>

You Tube Channels I love!

Joe Gardener aka Joe L'ampel author and tv host: <https://www.youtube.com/user/joegardenerTV>

The Rusted Garden aka Gary Pilarchik: <https://www.youtube.com/user/pilarchik>

MIGardener aka Luke: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVGVbOl6F5rGF4wSYS6Y5yQ>

Roots and Refuge Farm: aka Jess and Jeremiah: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTZN3HhejW1tOiRdLGUCGGA>

Epic Gardening aka Eric Espiritu: <https://www.youtube.com/user/EpicGardening>

University of Illinois Extension Service Links:

[Illinois Extension Vegetable Garden Directory and Recipes](#)

[Illinois Extension Vegetable Guide: Garden Preparation, Planting and Troubleshooting](#)

[Soil Testing Resources from Illinois Soil Testing Association](#)

[Check out Illinois Extension Horticulture YouTube Channel for helpful videos](#)

Download helpful handouts:

[Illinois Extension Resource Files](#)