



FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

The Time is Now for Victory Gardens: an Op-Ed by Rose Hayden-Smith

By Rose Hayden-Smith

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As an historian of the Victory Garden movement during WWI and WWII, I'd like to throw my endorsement to **Eat the View**. What is it they say about revolutions...begin everywhere at once?

To me, the idea of a vegetable garden on the White House lawn is much more than symbolic; the Victory Gardens of WWI and WWII had important impacts... The Victory Gardens of World War I and World War II - and the garden efforts of the Great Depression - helped Americans successfully negotiate hard times. These gardens helped the family budget; improved dietary practices; reduced the food mile and saved fuel; enabled America to export more food to our allies; beautified communities; enabled every American to contribute to a national effort; and helped bridge social, ethnic, class and cultural differences during a time when cooperation was widely needed. Gardens were an expression of solidarity, of patriotism, and shared sacrifice. They were found everywhere...schools, homes, and throughout public spaces in communities all over the nation. No American was too famous or too important to garden. No gardening effort was too small. Every effort counted. Americans did their bit. And it mattered, and not just in a symbolic sense, but by producing real results. Consider this: In WWI, the Federal Bureau of Education nationalized a school garden program and funded it with War Department monies. Millions of students gardened at school, at home, and in their communities. A national Liberty Garden (later Victory Garden) program was initiated that called upon all Americans to garden for the nation, and the world. In part because of the success of home gardeners (and careful food preservation), the U.S. was able to significantly increase exports to our starving European Allies. During 1943, an estimated 3/5ths of Americans participated in some sort of gardening activity, including Eleanor Roosevelt, who planted a Victory Garden on the White House Lawn, and Vice President Henry Wallace, who gardened with his son at the VP's residence. Nearly 40% of the fresh fruits and vegetables consumed stateside during 1943 were grown in school, home and community gardens. In addition to providing much-needed food, gardening helped Americans accept the nation's plurality, providing a positive experience that transcended race, class and socioeconomic divisions. That bridged rural/urban differences. They provided a way for all Americans to provide a service to the nation. Gardens did not represent empty rhetoric or symbolism...through gardening efforts, Americans made significant contributions to the war effort. Our nation has many needs right now. We all share concerns about our food system. Families need help with their personal economies. Entire communities are food-insecure. We have a tenuous connection with the land. Obesity is an epidemic. Environmental concerns - and declining oil supplies - dictate a need to recreate more sustainable and local food systems. A revival of the successful national gardening programs of the past could help in many, many ways. This would not be a costly program. All of the educational materials that support school, home and community gardens (and urban agriculture) is available through exist-



ing government agencies and private organizations. A current government-sponsored program (through the USDA, state land grant institutions, and county government) fields thousands of highly-trained Master Gardeners, who could be called upon to share their expertise with school, home and community gardeners. What is needed to make this idea a reality is an “ask” and a “do” by our new President, which is why I’m a strong supporter of Roger Doiron’s **Eat the View** effort. By putting a vegetable garden on the White House lawn, millions of Americans would be encouraged to follow the First Family’s example and garden. We are so eager for change, so eager to engage again in a civic sense. Americans would be inspired to plant food for their families, and their communities. To perhaps share extra produce with food banks and the growing number of hungry in our nation. To learn more about our food system, and what needs to change. This would not be symbolic, but rather, would show Americans that the personal actions they take as individuals, when combined with the actions of millions of other Americans, can make a vast difference. It’s time to put a vegetable garden (BACK) on the White House lawn, and I’m hoping our new First Family will lead the way.

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