

Victory Gardens: What Could They Look Like Here? Jason Bradford, November 29, 2005

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A few people in town probably still remember the so-called Victory Gardens of WWII, where the need to supply troops overseas was motivation to become locally more self-reliant at home.ⁱ I've been thinking both about what these home and community gardens looked like in the Willits area, and what they might look like today if Americans were once again asked to produce food for the cause of national security.

My thoughts begin by considering the local environment. Because rainfall occurs in the winter and summers are dry, taking advantage of the rainy season to grow food is probably wise. Many familiar foods need cool weather to grow, like the grains wheat, rye, barley and oats. However, these will not mature until July, making it difficult to harvest winter crops and use the same area to plant summer crops. Many summer crops need to be planted by late May if they are to mature by late September so frost can be avoided.

When viewed from the priority of capturing natural rainfall, the gardening season begins in the fall. And since these "Victory Gardens" are about feeding us, they would emphasize crops that yield significant calories, i.e., grains and root vegetables. Most of the area in a fall-winter garden, perhaps 70%, would be in some combination of the following grain and legume crops: wheat, rye, oats, barley, triticale, fava beans, Austrian peas, and vetch. In late winter, lentils and garbanzo beans (chick peas) can also be sown, and so can many of the grains. Frost tolerant root crop species include: garlic, onions, shallots, leeks, parsnips, carrots, beets, turnips, celeriac, horseradish, and radishes. Another 20-25% of the garden space would probably be sown in these. The remaining 5-10% would be in leafy vegetables such as lettuce, chard, collards, spinach, kale, and cabbage.

If you can't afford or don't have irrigation, that may be it! A garden planted just before the major rains arrive and harvested in June and July as the soil dries may be all that is possible. I have found winter gardens to be much less labor intensive than summer ones and produce valuable, familiar food.

For those with irrigation, more options are available. Fall crop selection may be similar to what is described above, but some portion of the 70% area devoted to winter grains and legumes can be harvested immature in April and May to plant spring and summer crops. These early-harvested areas are not wasted—they provide important sources of compost material that are essential for building and maintaining healthy soil. Keep in mind the backdrop of this scenario, i.e., greater self-sufficiency, meaning truckloads of compost may not be available so we must grow our own.

Spring and summer plantings would likely emphasize traditional favorites such as corn, squash, tomatoes, peppers, peas, beans, broccoli, artichokes, onions and potatoes. Potatoes may comprise about 30% of the garden space because they yield the most calories per area. They need to be stored properly so they don't rot, and not over-sown or the risk of blight and soil fatigue increases. Less familiar crops that also do well here include: sorghum, quinoa, amaranth, buckwheat, cowpeas, soybeans, and Jerusalem artichokes.

Those who live in the Little Lake Valley flood plane may have trouble with winter gardens if the soil is constantly saturated. In these areas, construction of raised beds may be useful. Though a potential liability in the winter, flood plane zones may be suited to dry land farming (i.e., without irrigation) of summer crops. I am interested to speak with anyone who knows about dry land farming here.

Most people who live in town can likely find a small garden plot. Even 100 sq ft is enough to produce an abundance of food and offset rising grocery store prices. Those with no personal space can help with the new community garden at the Willits Integrated Services Center.

From a broader perspective, many see sustainable local food systems as necessary to counter-act the specters of climate change, resource depletion and geopolitical tensions.ⁱⁱ Victory Gardens may get us through difficult times, but the value of gardening is ever lasting. Those who garden find a connection to nature, receive joy in whimsical moments of beauty, and get a visceral sense of what they are made of. For all these reasons, many who've suffered with hopelessness and loss of control, such as prisoners, are rehabilitated through gardening.ⁱⁱⁱ The real "victory" in these gardens will be in the conflicts they avoid and the positive transformations they create.

Willits has world-class resources available to get anyone started on their own Victory Gardens. Visit one of the local nurseries for tools and tips. Check out the publications of Ecology Action for guidance.^{iv} Order seeds from the local seed company.^v Then plant those seeds and watch every day miracles happen!

If you lived in the Willits area during WWII and recall the Victory Gardens, please call the REDI/WELL office (459-1256). When you call, we will take your name and telephone number and invite you to an informal meeting along with others to share your memories of that important time. We in the community treasure our elder citizens and want to learn from your valuable experience.

ⁱ www.victoryseeds.com/TheVictoryGarden/

ⁱⁱ www.energybulletin.net/30.html; www.energybulletin.net/5225.html; www.energybulletin.net/7088.html

ⁱⁱⁱ www.saturdaymarket.com/garden.htm

^{iv} www.growbiointensive.org

^v www.bountifulgardens.org