

The 21st Century Victory Garden

By *Eleanore Lewis and the National Garden Bureau*
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During World War II, experienced and first-time gardeners in urban, suburban, and rural areas planted vegetable gardens to grow produce. Many turned over patches of lawn to create gardens large enough to feed their families through the summer and, sometimes, to preserve some for winter use. Back in the '40s, people tended their victory gardens basically for their own use and to share the overabundant bounty with neighbors.

The 21st century victory garden expands the original intent to include an extra row or bed you plant specifically to share-with those who need the nutrition that fresh vegetables provide but lack the means to grow their own. Plant a row, or more, for the hungry and distribute the produce to a nearby soup kitchen or food bank.

Planning Your Garden

No matter what size garden you decide on, take the best advantage of the area. Wide beds-about 3 feet across-are better than rows because you cut down on the number of paths you need, especially important in a small garden. Vegetables need full sun, so select a site with a southern exposure. Plan to put tall vegetables, such as tomatoes and trellised vining crops, on the north side of the garden so they do not shade other plants.

In addition to familiar, traditional vegetables, try a few newer ones to expand your culinary possibilities: Bok choy, Japanese eggplant, jalapeno or other hot peppers, and herbs such as Thai basil, Mexican mint marigold, and cilantro.

Plan for success by selecting easy vegetables you sow directly in the garden.

Five Sure-Fire Vegetables

The following five vegetables are among the easiest to start from seed sown into prepared garden soil outdoors. With regular watering and nutrient rich soil, they produce bumper harvests.

Beans. Gardeners can grow beans that are small bushes or pole beans that will climb 6 to 8 feet. Warm weather vegetables, beans do not germinate well in cold soil; wait until late spring to sow them. Pole beans produce over a longer period of time than bush beans, and they occupy no more space because they grow best twining up trellises or bamboo tepees. Sow thinly in blocks in a wide bed, along the base of a trellis, or around each pole of a tepee. Sow bush beans in rows or blocks. Rows can be about 2 feet apart. To harvest bush beans more easily, stick a few twiggy tree or shrub prunings in the bed when you sow to keep the slightly vining stems upright. For a longer harvest, sow bush beans every 3 to 4 weeks until

midsummer. Add color to the garden with a selection of beans with green, purple, and yellow pods.

Cucumber. Both slicing and pickling cucumbers are warm-weather crops, and both produce an abundance of fruit. To save space, grow cukes on a trellis or in a cage instead of letting them sprawl on the ground (fruit turns out straighter as well). In late spring, sow seeds sparingly and thin seedlings to sit about 1 foot apart. Guide the plants onto the trellis as they begin to put out tendrils. Keep plants watered well through the season. Harvest fruit often and when it is small (length depends on variety, anywhere from 4 to 8 inches long). If you want to grow pickling cucumbers, be forewarned: two to three plants suffice, and you may find it difficult to keep up with the harvesting!

Peas. One of the cool-weather vegetables, peas grow best as an early spring or a fall crop. Sow this short-vining vegetable in blocks or in double rows with a short trellis, or pea fencing, in between the rows to make harvesting easier. Grow sweet snap peas, snow peas, or shelling (English-type) peas. Harvest the pods of the first two when small to eat whole, cooked or raw; shell the mature pods of snap and shelling peas. If you plant a row to give to a soup kitchen, stick with snap or snow peas, which make preparation faster for the cooks!

Radishes. Surely the easiest vegetable to grow, radishes mature in 25 to 28 days. Because there are only so many radishes a family can eat at one time, sow seeds sparingly, two to three times ten days apart in spring and again late summer. Instead of devoting an entire row to them, sow the seeds with other veggies, such as beets and squash. The radishes will be ready to harvest before the others need the space. Skip midsummer sowing unless you particularly enjoy hot radishes.

Summer Squash. Like cucumbers, summer squash plants produce copious amounts of fruit. Unlike cucumbers (and winter squash), summer squash grows as a bush, not a vine, but it needs space for its mature spread of 3 to 4 feet. Sow a hill, or group, of 3 to 4 seeds, spacing the hills 3 to 4 feet apart. When seedlings reach 2 to 3 inches tall, thin each hill to the two strongest plants. Four to six plants feed a family of four very generously. Towards midsummer (mid-August), make a couple of new plantings if you have an empty bed. Summer squash grows as well in a flower border as in a vegetable garden; the foliage is striking until it begins to yellow near the end of the season.

Plant a Row

Plant A Row for the Hungry began as a grass roots program, which, under the auspices of the Garden Writers Association of America, continues to expand. Last year it was responsible for providing more than 1 million pounds of fresh produce to food banks, soup kitchens, and other organizations feeding the hungry across the country. According to Jim Wilson, former co-host of PBS's Victory Garden as well as an author and lecturer, the need for fresh produce now is just as great as it was during WWII-the changing economy has hit not only the ordinary working person

but also the processors that food banks traditionally rely on for contributions. Those contributions were down 40 percent last year, while the demand continues to increase.

You really can make a difference if you plant an extra row or two for the sole purpose of donating the harvest to the hungry. Increase the impact by getting your neighbors involved. For information on how to start your own PAR program or to find local food pantries, check out the PAR site managed by GWAA at www.gwaa.org/par or call toll-free 877-GWAA-PAR.

Vegetables and Herbs for a Victory Garden

basil	onions
beets	oregano
broccoli	parsley
brussels sprouts	peas
bush beans	potatoes
carrots	radishes
chives	spinach
cilantro	summer squash
cucumbers	swiss chard
dill	sweet corn
eggplant	thyme
lettuce	tomatoes
melons	

Making the Most of Your Space

Harvest more than once from the same row or bed by making use of techniques such as interplanting and succession planting. Follow vegetables that grow best in cool weather, such as radishes and lettuce, with warm-weather crops, such as tomatoes and peppers. Purchase bedding plants of tomatoes, peppers and eggplant.

A few winning combinations:

- * radishes and summer squash
- * lettuce and peppers or tomatoes
- * lettuce and pole beans
- * peas and cucumbers
- * beans and sweet corn
- * beans, sweet corn, and pumpkins

Patriotic Flower Flourishes

Show off your victory garden by surrounding the beds or the perimeter of the garden with a border of red, white, and blue flowers. Bring a few bunches of the cut flowers with you when you drop off vegetables at a food pantry or soup kitchen; as Jim Wilson says, "they help brighten the tables." Try a few of these combinations based on AAS Winners:

(Note: Plant height in parentheses)

- * *Salvia coccinea* 'Lady in Red' (18"-24")

- * Zinnia 'Profusion White' (10"-12")
- * Verbena 'Novalis Deep Blue' (8")
- * Zinnia 'Scarlet Ruffles' (2'-3')
- * Zinnia 'Profusion White' (10"-12")
- * Eustoma 'Forever Blue' (8"-10")
- * Snapdragon 'Rocket Red' (3')
- * Shasta Daisy 'Snow Lady' (10")
- * Eustoma 'Forever Blue' (8"-10")
- * Vinca 'Jaio Scarlet Eye' (12")
- * Nierembergia 'Mont Blanc' (5"-6")
- * Verbena 'Novalis Deep Blue' (8")
- * Celosia 'Prestige Scarlet' (12"-17")
- * Shasta Daisy 'Snow Lady' (10")
- * Verbena 'Novalis Deep Blue' (8")
- * Snapdragon 'Rocket Red' (3')
- * Snapdragon 'Rocket White' (3')
- * Eustoma 'Forever Blue' (8"-10")

We credit Eleanore Lewis as the author of this article.