



Kevin Milaeger

Milaeger's

Victory Gardens Then and Now

You've probably heard of Victory Gardens. They originated during WWI and were revived again during WWII. They were meant to engage the citizenry in the war effort. Vegetable gardening was encouraged so that much of the regular food supply could be sent to our troops. I don't recall any of my older relatives ever discussing Victory Gardens, but they all grew vegetables. I think it was just something you did, without government prompting. Nevertheless, there was active governmental promotion of the idea in the 1940's. Last weekend I saw a brief TV segment on the subject. They were reporting on the current resurgence of vegetable plant purchases in Southern California, where the gardening season is well underway, and probably is a year 'round activity. I didn't get the idea that the gardener's thought of themselves as "Victory Gardeners," but that is how the reporters presented it.



**my Great Grandpa Charlie Erickson's garden
(Sister Bay, WI) circa 1935**

I have acquired a couple of books from the 1940's that promoted Victory Gardens. They were pretty ambitious. Sample gardens are illustrated, the largest being 150' x 75'. Managing that would be almost a full time job. That size garden was meant to supply a family of five with vegetables for a year.



That's a lot of canning. The little garden I planted last week was just planted with different kinds of greens, because of the early planting date. There are about 65 plants in that garden, and I'll most likely be giving most of the



greens away. Maybe some of them could be frozen. That would be a new project for me.

The old Victory Garden books are fun to look at but I think today's needs are different. Some of these gardens recommend a 100' row of turnips, for example. I don't think anyone has ever asked me for turnips. But one worthwhile feature of the books is that they recommend focusing on the most nutrient rich vegetables, and only growing the low nutrition plants if there is leftover space. That makes sense if nutrition is your motivation. Even back in the early 40's, the savvy authors of these books were big on kale. It wasn't until twenty or so years ago that kale was christened a superfood, but these authors had the inside information. Kudos to them. Also on the list of "must grow" plants is beets (for the greens,) Swiss chard, dandelion, leaf lettuce, green onions (scallions), and spinach.

Way down on the list are lima beans, cabbage, white corn, cucumbers, eggplant, iceberg lettuce, and radishes. Too bad for radishes, but I think they're valuable because they add a distinctive flavor to a salad, making us more likely to eat salad.

With everyone spending a lot more time at home these days, this is an ideal time to start growing your own vegetables. You don't need a lot of room, and you can even do it on a balcony or patio, if that is all you can manage. If you want to do something larger, there are community gardens where you can rent space for a nominal fee. Right about now you are running out of excuses why you can't do a garden. As a bonus, this is something fun you can do with kids—get them outdoors and use up some of that energy.



(FIG. 4) This garden, 75 by 150 feet, is large enough to grow all the vegetables needed for a family of five throughout the year, including those put up for winter.

At my house, the soil is very poor so I put in a raised garden, filled with good soil. That area is now at least half filled with raspberry plants and rhubarb, and I use the remaining space for peppers and onions and herbs like basil, dill, and cilantro. My tomatoes are in containers. I also tend the little garden at our offices, so I have that produce available too. We all have a different garden situation and we have to work with it.

Those of you who saw my video last week know that I planted greens in the garden at Milaege's on April 3. The weather was decent, and the forecast was favorable, so I was optimistic. The roots have taken hold so I will apply a liquid fertilizer. I like granular too, but liquid is quicker acting. We like the ALGO family of liquid fertilizers. They are well received in Europe as well as here, and we've been getting good results with ALGO for about ten years now. I could start harvesting a few leaves, but we have plenty of greens in our greenhouse production, so I'll let the plants in the garden grow for another week before I start picking the outer leaves.





At Milaeger's we are expecting to see an increased interest in growing your own food this year, the virus notwithstanding. We're already seeing increases in vegetable seeds, so it follows that vegetable plants will be in demand too. We offer curbside pickup and delivery service if you prefer. Most folks like to pick out their own plants, but we are happy to accommodate your wishes.