



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Victory Gardens and COVID-19 by Laura Brekke



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In response to the uncertainty surrounding life with COVID-19, more and more Americans are planting victory gardens. What are victory gardens? How do they provide food security during a crisis? How do victory gardens embody hope for people of faith?

Victory What?

While rationing does not appear to be on the horizon during this pandemic, concerns over the fragility of the American food system continue to grow. Many Americans are feeling powerless in the face of shelter-in-place orders, job loss, overwhelmed medical facilities, and the suffering of neighbors and friends. With all of this uncertainty circling, other questions arise, especially around food production. Who will harvest our crops? What happens if the supermarkets can't keep up with the demand? What can we, as individuals, do in the face of an uncertain future?

In the wake of the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are rediscovering the tradition of victory gardens. Instead of relying on grocery stores to keep food in stock, many Americans are turning their lawns into small victory gardens to create some food security in an uncertain time. "People seem to be preparing for some serious disruptions in the food supply. I'm not alone in feeling concerned with how this may go down," said Nate Kleinman, cofounder of the non-profit Experimental Farm Network. These family- and community-centered gardens were popular during both of the World Wars and were an important source of both calories and nutrition for communities during times of scarcity caused by these wars.

This isn't without precedent; many of the war gardens of 1918 became the victory gardens of 1919 in the face of the Spanish flu. More Americans died from this deadly

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outbreak than were killed in the First World War. “The war-garden model was inspiring for a lot of people, because there were all these huge forces at work around the globe that were out of their control,” Kleinman said. Gardens provide a concrete way to exert a little control in an uncertain global economy.

If sales are any indication, people are turning to the victory garden movement in droves. The Virginia-based Southern Exposure Seed Exchange has seen approximately a 300% increase in orders since March 15. Views on YouTube for videos about how to build raised beds have skyrocketed. With a faceless enemy all around, planting a garden is an act of hope that has spread across the country.

REFLECT:

- What kind of “victory” would a modern garden provide?
- What spiritual practices can be cultivated in gardening?
- How might a garden support Christian community and fellowship in a time of self-isolation?

Gardening for Well-being

In a season where self-isolation may mean having to make do with the limited outdoor space, gardening offers an opportunity to cultivate the outdoors no matter how small your location. Whether you are tending a pot of basil on your windowsill, or a planting spinach and lettuce in a converted kiddie pool on your back stoop, gardening offers everyone the opportunity to be in touch with nature.

Studies have shown that time spent outdoors is good for both mental and emotional health. In fact, those who spend time in nature often recover more quickly from surgery, are less likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, and manage stress better. In Japan, spending time in nature for health is so popular they’ve given it a name: *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing.

According to *Psychology Today*, gardening provides several benefits to a person’s well-being. In addition to the benefits of physical exercise, gar-

dening allows us to practice mindfulness, or being present. “When I’m out there weeding, I want to hear the birds. I don’t want to hear anything else. It’s a quiet time, and I relish it,” says Joe Lamp’l, a gardener and founder of the website JoeGardener.com. Other avid gardeners echo this enjoyment of mindfulness in the garden. Another writer suggests including a space to sit and relax in the garden after you’ve accomplished your daily tasks.

Learning to accept imperfection is another of gardening’s positive gifts. “I love making mistakes,” said Lamp’l, “because I look at them as a chance to learn something new. Through those mishaps, you can understand what happened and why, and you can be empowered to relate that learning to new things.” For gardeners new and old, there are many lessons to be learned from new seedlings striving to make their way in the world.

REFLECT:

- What other lessons would working in a garden impart?
- Do you find yourself more at peace in nature? Why or why not?
- In what ways can Christian spiritual practices be integrated into gardening?

What to Grow

Adrian Higgins, a writer for *The Washington Post* and an avid gardener for more than 30 years, considers his victory garden a “Stick It to the Virus Garden.” In a column he wrote about the concept of victory gardens, he offers several key insights for the first-time gardener who might be trying to get started in the midst of the current global crisis.

Higgins begins by focusing on soil, sunlight, and water—essentials for growing any kind of produce. Raised beds, or just mounds of soil designated for planting, are the best way to begin, he advises, as well as making sure you choose a location that provides a good 6–8 hours of sunlight. Water is also key, and ensuring you have easy access through irrigation lines, rain catchment, or a good old-fashioned watering can is important.

Growing seasons vary across the country, but there are generally three planting seasons: early spring (March–June), where you can plant greens like spinach, kale, and chard, along with brassicas, like cabbage and broccoli, and the good old potato; summer (May–September) in which you can plant tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and squash; and fall (August–November), in which gardeners can plant another round of greens and garlic to overwinter. Beans can be grown throughout the summer months and can be planted every few weeks for a long harvest.

While a garden focused on calorie density might be the new victory gardener’s desire, it’s important to add other types of plants as well. Herbs like

oregano and rosemary can be used in cooking to lend flavor to your food, and flowers add beauty while attracting much needed pollinators. Fruit is an investment, as most fruits won’t yield their first year, but if you want a victory garden for years to come, they can be planted as seeds of hope for the next year.

REFLECT:

- If you are a gardener, what are your favorite plants to grow? If not, what are you most interested in growing?
- What can tending a garden teach us about Christian hope?

Core Bible Passages

Scripture is rooted in the garden. Adam and Eve are created and placed to live in the perfect garden of Eden (Genesis 2:7-10), and the final revelation of John ends our Scriptures with a heavenly garden in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:1-5). Gardens, planting, and nurturing creation are all ongoing themes throughout Scripture.

Matthew 17:20 compares one’s faith to that of a mustard seed—a tiny seed that grows and expands into a wild and brambly bush large enough to shelter birds on its branches. However, like the mustard seed, faith must be tended to grow. The parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-23) uses gardening as a metaphor for faith. Good soil and nurturing yield a deeply rooted faith, but faith rooted in poor soil or faith that is poorly tended can die easily.

Gardening is also more than a metaphor in Scripture. The Law and Prophets of the Hebrew Bible remind gardeners to give the first fruits to God as an act of thanksgiving (Leviticus 23:10; Proverbs 3:9) and to leave back some of the fruits for the needy to glean (Leviticus 23:22). Intrinsic to our faith, then, is the act of giving thanks for abundance and sharing that abundance. Feast or famine, abundance or plague, we are to be people of faith giving thanks and giving abundantly.

REFLECT:

- How does the biblical emphasis on gardens and gardening impact our relationship to food and its cultivation?
- What “first fruit” can we offer to God? What “fruits” might we provide for the less fortunate to glean?
- In the face of a global pandemic, how can we continue to plant seeds of faith in good soil?

A History of Victory Gardens

The victory garden movement started in 1917 in response to the First World War. Initially called “war gardens,” this movement encouraged Americans to plant gardens in any and all available spaces in order to free up the foodstuffs produced on bigger farms so that they could be sent to our allies in Europe. When the United States entered the war in 1918, the need to feed our soldiers spurred the victory garden movement even more.

The victory garden movement continued into 1919 when the United States was ravaged by another pandemic, the Spanish flu, which killed more citizens than the Great War that preceded it. Citizens planted gardens in their yards, empty lots, school grounds, and local parks. Even children were encouraged to join the effort through the Bureau of Education’s United States School Garden Army.

While the passion for gardening waned in the decades between the world wars—gardening is hard work especially for first time growers with little practical experience—it was revived with the onset of World War II. Patriotic posters circulated encouraging families to plant their own victory gardens to “make your rations go further,” and to garden as a way of doing each citizen’s part to defeat Nazis. The movement was a success, and victory gardens produced 20% of America’s fresh vegetables from over 20 million gardens during the war.

REFLECT:

- How can growing a garden be an act of patriotism?
- What benefits beyond food production would a garden have offered during a crisis?
- What lessons can the success of victory gardens teach Christians today?

United Methodist Perspective

“All creation is the Lord’s, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it.” So begins the United Methodist Social Principles section on “The Natural World.” Stewardship of God’s good creation is an important aspect of our Christian walk, and victory gardens can be one expression of responsible stewardship.

As many members of our communities face food insecurity, planting victory gardens on our home properties or church grounds can be an effective tool to fight against hunger. Churches like Aldersgate UMC in Carrollton, Texas, have transformed a portion of their property into a thriving community garden. In 2019, the garden yielded over 2,100 pounds of food to help feed the needy of their community. Since it began in 2010, the Giving Garden has donated nearly 1,600 lbs. of food. Now that’s mighty stewardship!

Victory gardens can also play a role in supporting struggling communities during and after a crisis. Food justice and security are important aspects of the Social Principles. They remind us that the very food we eat and provide to others is an act of justice, of faith, and of partnership with one another and all of creation.

REFLECT:

- What role do community gardens play in good stewardship of God’s creation?
- Is your church involved in a community garden? Why or why not? Is this an opportunity for mission?
- What role can the church play in addressing food security as a faith and justice issue?

Helpful Links

- “Food Supply Anxiety Brings Back Victory Gardens,” brief article on the return of victory gardens. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/dining/victory-gardens-coronavirus.html>
- “Gardening Is a Really Concrete Way That People Can Feel Empowered.” <https://slate.com/human-interest/2020/04/victory-garden-coronavirus-wwii-history.html>
- “Lockdown: Gardening Through the Coronavirus Crisis,” a video on the benefits of gardening in the midst of the pandemic. <https://youtu.be/LIixWDKDMjo>

About the Writer

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Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Opening Up

by Benjamin Dueholm

Many parts of the country have lifted or are considering lifting restrictions connected to COVID-19. What are some of the difficult questions we must answer as we consider lifting these restrictions? How do we make responsible choices in this uncertain situation? How does our faith guide us as we discern our path forward?



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Opening Prayer

Holy God, you plant the seed of faith deep within each of us. Help us to be good stewards of these seeds, and allow our time together to nurture our faith so it can continue to grow. Help us to be especially aware of our faith and to cultivate it daily during these difficult and trying times. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions in order to stimulate discussion.
- Invite any gardeners in your group to share about what they grow and what they've learned over the years. What tips do they have for new folks getting started?
- Research the crops that grow best for your area. What can you grow? Can your church grounds transform into a victory garden? If possible, plan a garden together.
- Watch the video on gardening in a crisis found in the "Helpful Links" section. What aspects appeal to you? How might cultivating a garden create space for spiritual practices?
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

If you live in an area where finding space to grow a garden is limited, research what grows well in pots for your climate. Have every member of your group commit to growing an herb or flower. Then, when shelter-in-place orders are lifted, organize a picnic around your herbs and decorate with your flowers.

If participants in your group have gardens, ask them to give virtual tours of their home gardens. Have them film short tours describing what plants are popping up.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, we give thanks for each new day. We are grateful for new life in all its blessed forms. Help us to see your goodness in each fresh green leaf, each ripe peach, and each blooming flower. Make us stewards of your good creation who never take your goodness for granted but always lift our voice in praise and thanksgiving. Amen.