

Emergency Services for the Hard Times

by Gary Kline

In these scary, hard times, many of us think about the Victory Gardens of World War II, even though most of us weren't there and have no memory of those gardens. I, myself, was 20 months old and my brother only weeks old when Pearl Harbor was hit in December of 1941, bringing America into the war. We look back to the Victory Gardens for inspiration and for guidance on what to do under our present dire circumstances, which are not expected to improve for quite some time.

Before they were named Victory Gardens these impromptu gardens were known as Food Gardens for Defense. This national gardening program was developed by the Department of Agriculture from recommendations of a multi-disciplinary national conference convened shortly after the war began. Coincidentally, this was almost at the same time the organic gardening movement was kicked off in America by J. I. Rodale with the 1942 publication of the first Organic Farming and Gardening magazine.

The man picked to run the national program was Maynard G. Kains, a USDA employee, former college professor and well-known gardening author of the times. A major goal was to enlist the citizenry in assisting the war effort and saving the country. Saving the country in its economic war can be seen as one of the goals of today's Victory Garden counterparts as we hunker-down for an extended period of ongoing hard times.

Victory Gardens were both a spontaneous response and a government campaign to aid the war effort. They were widely viewed then, and since, as a national emergency effort. Today, people and gardening writers commonly portray the Victory Gardens program as a measure to increase the national food supply, relieve farmers of part of the supply requirement for feeding the troops, and reducing the energy and dollar costs of shipping food around the country and abroad.

Certainly the gardens were a way of raising and enjoining patriotic support for the war effort. But while all of these were important reasons for having Victory Gardens, they were not the actual underlying and official reason. What else could it have been, you probably are wondering. I'll reveal that further on and make the connection back to the resurgence of home food gardening going on today.

There is much we can learn from the Victory Garden experience; more than we might expect. There is also new knowledge and improved methods and materials we can apply to make our modern day gardens even more productive and rewarding than those of olden days.

In 1942 Kains compiled and authored Food Gardens for Defense, the unofficial expert guide to vegetable and fruit gardening, later to be retitled and reissued (in 1978) as The Original Victory Garden Book. That reissuance was timed for what was in the 1970s era a strong "back to the land" revival. That revival, however, seemed to peter out by the 1990s, when we all got more "realistic" in pursuit of material wealth and subservience to corporate greed. See where that got us.

Saving the country was just one of the goals identified in the Victory Garden Book. As the back cover relates "It is a food gardening guide to save your budget, save your health, and even save your country." Also quoting from the back cover " - - - this practical handbook, first published early in World War II, shows you how to get the most delicious foods of high nutritional value out of a small plot of ground." In some respects that was more doable then than it generally is today.

Saving one's budget is probably the uppermost concern of people today, but saving your health is right up there in the minds of a sizable portion of the population. What really surprised and almost astounded me in reading Kains' book is the attention given then to health and malnutrition. In fact, this was the major reason that emerged from that 1942 conference for initiating a national gardening program. As mentioned, there were several reasons behind this war-time "emergency" campaign, but the chief reason behind the Victory Gardens was nutrition, or more precisely, countering malnutrition in the form of under-nourishment. Here (p. vi) Kains states the reason: "The program adopted by that conference has been given wide publicity that our people might be healthier, stronger, and better fitted to meet the present emergency. You and I know that we as a nation should keep ourselves fit, strong, and healthy, able to do our jobs well during this emergency and afterwards." Gardening for the nation's defense takes on a different meaning when seen this way.

Americans were shocked in more ways than one in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. They were stunned to learn that in the land of plenty, a very high percentage of draftees failed the draft physical. The sobering realization is that nothing has really changed nearly 70 years later. In the 21st Century we are still a sick nation, malnourished and, overall, getting worse. We've got health care upside down. Degenerative diseases almost unknown back then are rampant today and among the nation's leading killers. Far greater numbers of Americans are crippled and killed by these modern diseases than in today's wars. Autopsies performed on soldiers killed in the Korean War showed alarming degeneration as well.

Kains blamed processed food from tin cans, but he also blamed impoverished soils and the lack of fresh vegetables and fruits (as well as animal-sourced foods) making their way into people's diets - - - in 1942! Junk foods and convenience were even then squeezing out wholesome, real food and the healthful lifestyle - - - which Americans had known before they fell for convenience, cheap food and, later, expensive junk food.

Regarding those physical exam failures, here is what Kains said on page one: "[It] has been conclusively shown to us - - - by the sad story of the Selective Service Act. Great numbers of our young men were rejected because of malnutrition or health conditions directly attributable to it. Lack of sufficient vitamins and minerals in our food may be due to the inability [access?] of many of our people to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables from the local stores. Sometimes it is due to lack of knowledge of food values, ways of cooking, or to unfortunate food habits. - - - And there are still those people who, - - - show a marked degree of indifference to the need for proper foods for health and vigor." More likely we were lead astray by the pied pipers of devitalized and deceptive false foods. What to do about it? Said Kains (p. 2) in advocating home Victory Gardens: "Now, remembering that vitamins [and minerals] are food elements necessary for growth, health and vigor, let us quickly learn what vegetables [and fruits] to grow in our own gardens so that our families may be well fed."

Kains concludes chapter one (p. 6) with this fundamental, yet forgotten message: "Do not forget in all your garden planning and planting that if the vegetables [and fruits] you eat are to be rich in vitamins [and minerals] they must be grown in soil which is rich. Vegetables vary in their nutritive value in proportion to the fertility of the soil in which they are grown. Good vegetables grown in good soil, gathered in their prime, and cooked properly, will give longer life and greater happiness." So said the drum major of the Victory Gardens parade.

So, now the purpose of this paper is to remind us of the fundamentals and introduce us to old and new ways of growing productive and healthful gardens, that we may all save our budget, save our health, and get, as a bonus, a whole country saved from this current emergency. I speak here about a lifestyle and sustenance for all time. What we offer (through our new BLO Membership Community) is emergency services to help people through these hard times, but really to help us to a better way of life as well.

Following World War II, a back-to-the-land rush was expected to occur. We got, instead, suburbia. During the cold war years, in the early 1960s, long about the time of the Columbus Day Storm that hit the Northwest, I was in the Air Force, stationed in Okinawa, when I chanced to pick up a little book titled Five Acres and Independence written by one Maynard G. Kains. This book had sold many thousands of copies and it served to fire-up my imagination and desire to own a small piece of land, grow my own food and strive for self-sufficiency. I knew nothing then, and very little was said in Kains' book, about the organic method of gardening and farming.

Kains' book was packed with detailed practices, prescriptions, and lists of old-time farming practices upon which gardens were basically patterned. It is amazing how much was known back then by Kains about soils, fertility, minerals, microbes, double-digging (trenching), cover cropping, manures, "organics" and other topics in his Victory Garden book and, of course, his Five Acres book (first published in 1940). But, lest we get carried away by romantic notions about those good old days, it is well to acknowledge the shortcomings. Kains books were fairly replete with advice on the use of lead arsenate and such synthetic chemical pesticides and fertilizers in which that generation was blithely confident would be harmless and would rid us of any pests.

The one big gap I now see in Kains' knowledge, and in that of the legions of Rodale's followers in the organic camp, is in their grasp of the whole picture of soil fertility. In particular was their lack of awareness of the role of minerals and mineral balance as the foundation of full fertility leading to high nutrient density and maximal health in soils, plants and, ultimately, the consumers of those plants. Ironically this was all essentially worked out in the early to mid 20th Century contemporaneously with both Kains and Rodale by Dr. William Albrecht who was chairman of the Soils Department of the University of Missouri. This is a subject about which I have written extensively and plan to take up in follow-up articles.

A decade ago, as we approached year 2000, there was widespread apprehension of a Y2K disaster and financial collapse due to computer failures in nearly everything all around the world. It didn't happen. But about that time there was considerable interest in another variation in Victory Gardens known as Survival Gardens which saw people buying-up large collections of vegetable seeds to be put into storage (if not right-away planted out), for hard times they expected. Open-pollinated, heirloom, and organic seeds naturally were the preferred basis of survival strategy.

About three years ago (2007), I was approached by a guy who emanated a "sky is falling" aura and who evidently knew next to nothing about gardening but wanted me to devise a four year survival garden plan and direct him to an appropriate seed source for carrying it out. This I agreed to do for a modest fee and produced a report and listing of open-pollinated seeds that would be viable at least 3 years (some exceptions), if properly stored, and I laid out a generalized planting scheme and other suggestions regarding fertilization, etc.

Due to its length, I obviously can't reproduce that report with this article, but I hope to do so before long for the subscribing members of our BLO Membership Community, which you can learn about and hopefully join by going to www.blacklakeorganiccommunity.com. Meanwhile, you may find useful the 2005 book of Northwest gardening guru, Steve Solomon, titled Gardening When it Counts: Growing Food in Hard Times. The book is an extension of his previous series or editions of Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades, known to most everyone who gardens in the Maritime Northwest. The "hard times" book takes a more global purview and recommends planting on a wide-spacing pattern (that presumes ample garden space) in anticipation of wide-scale water shortages. That's the next scarcity crisis.

We old-timers can remember the old admonition to "save for a rainy day". I can recall my surprise to learn in the refrain of a 1960s song that, suddenly, that rainy day is here.