

VICTORY GARDENING

By Ellen Knight¹



Victory gardens, encouraged by posters such as this, were seen all over Winchester beginning in 1942.

World War II had hardly started for Americans when, in January 1942, the National Office of Civilian Defense encouraged a Victory Garden Program be started in each community under the auspices of the local Civilian Defense organizations. Since many food items were rationed and canned ones might not be available during the winter, home-grown vegetables would provide more abundance and variety for families and thus aid morale, as well as help to lower the price of vegetables needed by the U.S. War Department to feed the troops. Further, home canning (in glass jars) would save metal needed by the military.

The challenge was not a new one. The people of Winchester had been urged to grow their own during World War I to avoid food shortages. More than 80 acres were used as vegetable gardens, including 6 acres of potatoes at the Country Club. During WWII, the need to provide for the troops was greater and lasted longer.

In March 1942, the National Victory Garden Conference urged garden clubs to take the lead, due to their skill, enthusiasm, and the will to do. In Winchester, the garden clubs did, in fact, lead the way. In 1942, the Better Homes Garden Club sponsored a victory garden in a field located beside the Boy Scout Headquarters off Myrtle Terrace. A large portion of the vegetables grown were donated to the Home for the Aged.

When the state Garden Club Federation met in October, prizes for outstanding work during the year went to the Winchester Garden Club and the Better Homes Garden Club (among others). Gov. Leverett Saltonstall called upon the members of the federation to create further interest in the planting of gardens throughout the state since war-time transportation of vegetables was growing more restricted.

Begun in 1942, victory gardening took greater hold in Winchester in 1943 with residents planting gardens in their own yards or finding a private or public plot to use.

OPEN SPACE

In the 1940s, Winchester had more open space than now which could be used for gardening. There were still a few farms, in fact. The Purcells had a farm on Cambridge Street, later known as the Purcell Pansy Patch. Emilio Luongo, whose brother Emedio was also a farmer, had a four-acre market garden on Cross Street.

Up on Ridge Street, the Lockes, Irwins, and Coxes farmed at the southern end, while the Thompsons farmed at the north end, part of their land now being the site of the Vinson-Owen School. (At the tail end of the war, Italian prisoners of war were put to work on some Ridge Street farms, guarded by an armed soldier.)



The Downes home on High Street

In 1943, however, crops were sprouting up everywhere. At least one resident advertised plots to rent. Others shared them. The Downes family, for example, whose six children were all in the services and who owned nine acres on High Street (now the site of the Ambrose School and Sanborn House) made a portion of their estate available for the use of Indian Hill Victory Gardens. Arrangements were made in its second year for 70 plots, all plowed, cultivated, fertilized, and ready to plant, so that more Indian Hill Victory Gardeners could be accommodated.

Some other neighborhoods banded together, such as the Central Street farmers who had victory gardens on the Ginn Estate (site of Ginn Road).

The garden clubs were not alone in sharing crops. The Knights of Columbus raised vegetables which it gave to the Sisters of St. Joseph at the Convent of St. Mary's Church, prompting a Globe reporter to write, "Knighthood has flowered again in Winchester."

Youth got involved. In 1942, the 4-H garden club planted a victory garden and participated in the annual display of vegetables and flowers sponsored by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society of Boston that August. In 1943, when the Boys Scouts went to Camp Fellsland (in Amesbury), they grew the vegetables they would themselves eat.

The Board of Selectmen helped out residential gardeners, opening up the Town's unused land and assigning highway crews to plow and harrow it. Shore Road Field (now site of the high school) and the former Puffer land (current site of the Transfer Station), for example, were turned into gardens.



CORN IS YOUNG, BUT GROWING—Grand Knight Henry Murray of Winchester shows an ear to Rev. James F. Fitzsimmons.

In April 1943, the Selectmen also entered into lease agreements with the Metropolitan District Committee to use land along South Border Road, the upper Mystic Lake, and Mystic Valley Parkway for victory gardens.

Under a headline "Garden Soil is Sacred," the *Winchester Star* reported that month that the Board ordered the Police Department "to levy their powers without sympathy upon all encroachers," be they trespassers or others who would tread on the life-bearing earth.

"It's the same throughout the town," the *Star* reported in 1943. "Wherever there was a piece of good land it has been converted in a Victory Garden."

HARVEST SHOWS

To encourage residents to grow their own, the Civilian Defense Victory Garden Division sponsored a Victory Garden Harvest Show in Town Hall, arranged by the Winchester Garden Club and the Winchester Better Homes Garden Club. In September 1943 and again the next year, Town Hall auditorium was transformed into the semblance of a county fair.



"From his vantage point atop a pile of magnificent squash backed with cornstalks, a three-foot colored statue of Uncle Sam...looked down upon a colorful display of flowers, fruits, vegetables and canned goods, the products of Winchester Victory Gardens.

Two wagon wheels, a wheelbarrow full of squash, and others (about 1700 lbs. in all) arranged artistically about the stage gave a real country atmosphere."

Exhibits of a wide variety of vegetables, herbs, and home-preserved vegetables, berries, and fruits were displayed on long tables, with flowers arranged on a large V table in the small Town Hall (rear section of the auditorium), adding a peacetime touch to the wartime show. In the very center of the hall a Wishing Well was erected inviting contributions for the Camp Hospital Fund of the State Federation of Garden Clubs. An added feature was an information booth staffed by state agricultural authorities, enlisted to answer questions and give advice on gardening problems.

Prizes were given for every type of exhibit. First prize in the amateur class went to Vernon Jones (a real estate agent), whose exhibit from his first year of gardening included many kinds of squash, watermelon, beets, carrots, tomatoes, potatoes, turnips, dried beans, cabbages, and pumpkins.

In 1944, another harvest fair was held, equally popular. Jones had at least 45 distinct varieties in his exhibit and again carried off first prize. The complete list of prize winners ran to two long columns in the *Winchester Star*.

“Everybody is Victory garden conscious,” the Sons of Italy columnist stated that summer. “Wherever there is a piece of good soil someone is working it. Some have even dug up their front lawns, and between you and me a flourishing Victory garden is a pretty sight whether it is on some remote plot or a front lawn.”

PRIDE



*Victory gardener
Walter Skerry*

Vernon Jones was not the only gardener with bragging rights in town. During the summer of 1943, the *Star* recorded several successes. “Fireman Walter Skerry is very proud of the Victory Garden which he has at the rear of the Central Station, and the reporter will have to admit, after a visit Monday forenoon, that things looked very promising.”

“According to all reports now current about town singing the praises of our many Victory gardens, none can compare with the effort of Mr. P. Stewart Newton of Wedgemere avenue. From what we hear his broccoli is so healthy and of such profusion that he is now spending his spare time sitting in his rocking chair beneath its spreading branches. Whether he has slung a hammock under his tomato plants is not recorded, but it appears imminent.”

“William J. Murray challenges all comers with his Victory Garden. He claims his broccoli is so large that one bunch will feed a family of ten! As for tomatoes, he says he never saw such tomatoes. All he has to do is to pluck a plant and his bushel basket is full of luscious red ripe fruit. Things are looking up in the food line for some of us all right.”

TAKING UP ARMS

On the other hand, Colver Dyer lamented, “I planted 185 hills of corn and was just about to start picking. Now it is all gone, torn down and devoured.” Squirrels were to blame. Try applying red pepper to the silk of each ear, one reader suggested. “Hooey!” wrote another, “An expert marksman is the best medicine.”

Others found their gardens raided by squirrels. An appeal was made to the Selectmen for permission to shoot them. The Selectmen turned to town counsel Addison Pike who could find no statutory provision either permitting or prohibiting the shooting of squirrels.

They then consulted with Police Chief William Rogers, who said he had no objection under the circumstances. The board then voted that they would “interpose no objection” to any action needed to suppress the menace. As the *History of Winchester* records, “Thus began the battle of the squirrels. And the squirrels lost.”

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on July 10, 2017. This revision supersedes all previous articles.