

Idaho Victory Garden series inspires homegrown pay-offs in trying times

The Situation

During the latter half of 2008, along with the rest of the country, the economy in Canyon County slowed sharply. The unemployment rate rose to 6.3% by the end of 2008, above the national average, and was projected to nearly double in 2009, which it did, reaching 12.3% in June 2009.

Bruce Butterfield, research director for the National Gardening Association (NGA), explains "as the economy goes down, food gardening goes up. We haven't seen this kind of spike in 30 years." Rich Morin and Paul Taylor of the Pew Research Center released a report in April 2009 indicating that nationally, one-in-five adults say they are following the example of first lady Michelle Obama and are making plans to plant a vegetable garden to save money on food.

Victory gardens, also called war gardens, were planted in backyards and community spaces in the United States and Europe during World Wars I and II to reduce pressure on the wartime food supply. These gardens were also considered a civil "morale booster" and the government and businesses urged people to make gardening a family and community effort. The US Department of Agriculture estimates that the 20 million victory gardens grown in 1918 yielded 9-10 million tons, an amount equal to all commercial production of fresh vegetables that year.

Our Response

With over 200 names on a Canyon County Extension gardening education waiting list and a 40% increase in the number of vegetable and fruit related home gardening calls, Canyon County Horticulture Extension Educator Ariel Agenbroad designed a class that reinterpreted the victory garden idea for spring 2009.



Rosemary Weaver earned CEU credits for enrolling in the Idaho Victory Garden series, and shared photos of her great garden, too.

Understanding that not everyone on the waiting list could commit to a 13-week University of Idaho Master Gardener Program, but still wanted access to the same high quality information, a shorter, focused series was developed to train individuals and families to successfully and economically plan, plant, harvest and preserve safe and healthy vegetables, herbs and fruits in home and community gardens.

The evening course spanned six weeks and was co-listed as a Community Education class through the College of Western Idaho in Nampa. As in the Master Gardener program, Idaho Victory Garden classes were taught by University of Idaho Extension horticulturists, Master Gardeners, Food Safety Advisors & local experts who shared their knowledge and expertise. A course notebook included hard copies of University of Idaho Extension publications *Planning an Idaho Vegetable Garden*, *Composting at Home*, *Harvesting and Storing Fresh Garden Produce*, the *Ball® Blue Book of Preserving* and other compiled resources and references. Some resources were available in Spanish, as well.

Program Outcomes

Fifty-one Treasure Valley residents enrolled in the Idaho Victory Garden Series. According to course evaluations, reasons for enrollment followed variations on recurring themes:

- 60% wanted to learn more about gardening in Idaho and topics presented in the series.
- 30% wanted to improve or maximize their current gardening efforts.
- 13% wanted to help their families and/or communities become more self-sufficient.

By the end of the series, 70% of class members evaluated said they planned to grow a garden this year. Home vegetable gardens average 600 square feet in size. The NGA estimates that a garden of this size can generate, on average, \$400-\$600 of produce. If 70% of the class grew a garden, the average value of all the food produced in their individual gardens would exceed \$21,000.

Post-course feedback was gathered at a Victory Garden Series reunion potluck, held in late August, and through a follow up survey, sent out in September. It was determined that 100% of respondents did grow a garden this season, and 100% of them planned to grow next year, adding:

- Absolutely, without a doubt, yes!
- Yes! Our first attempt this year was quite successful.
- Yes! It was a good experience-physically & mentally, good food, entertaining and saves money.
- Yes, yes, yes! I enjoy watching seeds grow from plants to veggies-and the harvest pay off.
- We so enjoyed tending the garden and the fruits & vegetables we ate or froze.

When asked how the Idaho Victory Garden Series had helped them in their efforts, gardeners responded:

- Provided wealth of information and resources.
- It inspired me when I got overwhelmed.
- I tried different things than I would have without such inspiration in your class.
- I learned so much & gained confidence to try things.
- It offered a ton of knowledge.
- I really enjoyed the refresher on things-we closed things up even more and got stunning results.
- Educated me on soil, growing from seed-just everything.

Class member Nancy Robinson sent the following message:

"I have attached some of the pictures of our Community Garden. We had a contest among the children of our elementary Sunday school classes. The winning name is: College Church Giving Garden (Nampa). We give the vegetables away to people in the neighborhood surrounding the church (17 families). If there are any left I take them to the church on Sunday mornings for whoever wants them. The Victory Garden Class was very valuable to me in starting the garden."



Nancy Robinson's scrapbook details the process of creating a church community garden and the bountiful harvest shared with members of the community.

The Future: The Canyon County Extension office is already receiving requests to enroll in a 2010 Victory Garden Series, and class evaluations have given excellent feedback on how to improve the series for the next season. Inspired by their participation in the Idaho Victory Garden series, Josie and Clay Erskine began offering a hands-on, season long gardening course on their Boise urban farm.

Cooperators: Barbara Case, College of Western Idaho staff, Ron Galloway, Dale Anderson, Jan DeRousse, Paulette Blaseg, Gina Baldwin, Marlene Fritz, Josie and Clay Erskine, Sharon Johnson, Diane Roberson, Tony McCammon, Jos Zamzow, Joey Peutz, Debbie Delaney, Julie Collie and Sally Hanssen.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Ariel Agenbroad, Extension Educator
University of Idaho Extension, Canyon County
501 Main St.
Caldwell, ID 83605
Phone: 208.459.6003
Fax: 208.454.6349
E-mail: ariel@uidaho.edu
www.extension.uidaho.edu/canyon/horticulture