

No small potatoes

by Trista Cornelius, guest opinion

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First lady Michelle Obama breaks ground for an organic herb and vegetable garden on the South Lawn of the White House.

First lady Michelle Obama's new kitchen garden at the White House is no small domestic event. If the success of victory gardens during World War II serves as an indicator, Mrs. Obama has just engaged the domestic front in transforming not only our nation's health, but our overall well-being.

In 1943, 20 million households, three-fifths of the population, produced 40 percent of the vegetables that Americans consumed, or 8 million tons of food. Such abundance freed canned goods to go to U.S. armed forces, who consumed 40 million pounds of food a day. Our own city of Portland estimated it had between 75,000 and 80,000 victory gardens, many on city-owned lots.

Since World War II, few of us have engaged so directly in food production and have paid little attention at all to food, taking its availability in our fast-paced lives for granted. Planting a garden at the White House, however, will be a more successful method of changing Americans' eating habits than anything else Mrs. Obama could have done.

Growing food inspires zealous, widespread effort because anyone can do it. In fact, the sense of satisfaction, pride, even self-reliance might be strongest for

the beginning gardener tending to a few pots of vegetables balanced on a window ledge. As one gardening expert wrote in the Saturday Evening Post in 1943, "There are few garden problems that honest sweat and a bit of intelligent planning won't solve."

If we can grow our own food, something so essential to staying alive, we can do anything, right?

Even if not a direct contribution to a war effort, growing food empowers people and improves morale. Although victory gardens were promoted as sacrificing for the war, they required no loss in material goods or well-being, but increased both. Even during grim war time, gardeners reported feeling invigorated and hopeful. Two women who pooled resources and grew a victory garden together not only procured enough produce to last the year, they found "a feeling of well-being and health such as we never had before. We are tanned, lean, hard as rocks, more easy-going, inclined to laugh more frequently."

Voila! No medical break-through required. Plant some seeds and experience weight lost, strength gained, mood lifted, and heart less burdened and more bolstered against disease.

Michelle Obama's garden brings national attention to a movement already well underway. If victory garden success was measured in pounds of produce, how should we measure the benefits of today's kitchen gardens? How about total cholesterol dropped, weight lost, heart disease reduced, neighbors met (because even the most passionate gardener can never consume all the zucchini a few vines yield), and old enemies (beets, Brussels sprouts) made friends anew.

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