

# *Victory on the Homefront*

## **School and Community Gardens Provide Food Access and Education**

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By Nicole Martorana

Victory gardens have a long history of not only providing food, but also a sense of self-sufficiency. Beginning during World War I, victory gardens were established as an answer to fighting hunger and economic difficulties. When the National War Garden Commission was established in 1917, victory gardens were created on public and private lands. Citizens were encouraged to grow their own food in these spaces, thus freeing up more farm-grown foods for American forces abroad. While victory gardens were numerous during the Great Depression and World War II, they slowly went out of fashion afterwards but have re-emerged in recent times<sup>1</sup>.

### ***Meeting Victory***

Oakland, California resident Victory V. Lee has brought new life and energy to this rich heritage through the school and community gardens she helps establish via her Victory Garden Foundation (VGF). With her work at VGF and as an Alameda County Master Gardener, Victory offers her time and expertise to the greater community through volunteering, seminars, and events. Says Victory,

*"In all of our gardens, the biggest part is education, community, getting to know each other, working together, sharing, and just having a great time."*

VGF was created with the mission to encourage and support people in growing their own food through education and hands-on training<sup>2</sup>. Founded in 2008, the organization is currently managing ten gardens in the East Bay (two school gardens and four community gardens). One of these is the Garden of Learning at Franklin Elementary School in Oakland.

### ***Garden of Learning***

Franklin's garden is an impressive 5000-square-foot space, with a gazebo and classroom for both indoor and outdoor learning sessions. The garden also has a composting system, as well as 20 raised beds for pollinator and edible garden plots.

Thanks to the help and dedication of Victory and assistant volunteers, nearly all of the school's more than 700 students have been able to learn in this outdoor classroom and bring that knowledge home to their own tables. This includes how to plant, care for, and use a variety of produce, fruit trees, herbs, and edible flowers. Learning sessions have not only focused on health and nutrition, but also integrated math and literature curriculum for a truly hands-on, cross-disciplinary approach. Observes Victory of her work with the students of Franklin,

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Schumm, "America's Patriotic Victory Gardens," History Channel, May 29, 2014.  
<http://www.history.com/news/hungry-history/americas-patriotic-victory-gardens>.

<sup>2</sup> *The Victory Garden Foundation Blog*, <http://victorygardenfoundation.blogspot.com>.

*"Children are sponges. Getting them involved is the key to us making some changes in the way we treat and use food."*

### ***Soldiers of the Soil***

Despite recent trends, the history of school gardens can actually be traced back to the war years as well. Inspired by the popularity and effectiveness of victory garden campaigns, the federal Bureau of Education created the U.S. School Garden Army to train students to be "soldiers of the soil."<sup>3</sup> This was not only a way to grow additional resources, but also an important form of hands-on education. Says Constance Carter, Head of the Science Reference Section at the U.S. Library of Congress,

*"Honesty, accountability, thrift, appreciation for public property, cooperation, a sense of pride, and self-respect were hallmarks of the garden experience."*<sup>4</sup>

These qualities still hold true today. The Edible Schoolyard Project, which has been creating and supporting school gardens across the country for twenty years, was founded by Alice Waters and its first garden began at Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Berkeley.<sup>5</sup> While she may not be as nationally- and internationally-famous as her nearby food advocate neighbor, Victory's work is no less important or impactful to the local communities she touches. Reflects Victory,

*"Amazingly, there is so much to learn in the garden that really doesn't have anything to do with gardening, but it makes us a lot better group of people."*

By being taught the skills and having available land on which to grow their own food, families are better able to feed themselves. Equally as important, they are able to engage with their communities about creative ways to fight hunger and sustain a fruitful table.

### ***Can \$1 Buy Justice?***

"Grow. Share. Connect." states the tagline for the VGF blog. "Food growing at home is an empowering activity."<sup>6</sup> In a 2011 article by Nikki Salzman, entitled "Using SNAP Benefits to Grow Your Own Food," the USDA published a figure that has been widely recirculated since then:

*"For every \$1 spent on seeds and fertilizer, home gardeners can grow an average of \$25 worth of produce."*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>4</sup> Constance Carter, transcript of video presentation, The Library of Congress, July 20, 2010. <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/journey/schoolgardens-transcript.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The Edible Schoolyard Project, "Our History," <http://edibleschoolyard.org/our-story>.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>7</sup> Nikki Salzman, "Using SNAP Benefits to Grow Your Own Food," *The USDA Blog*, July 6, 2011, <http://blogs.usda.gov/2011/07/06/using-snap-benefits-to-grow-your-own-food>.

This is an impressive figure, but not all SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) participants, or under-served communities in general, know how to garden or have easy access to land on which to do so. And the alternative options for accessing food can be extremely limited.

As the news organization Oakland North writes on its website,

*“Anyone who has shopped for food in a poor urban neighborhood, in Oakland or elsewhere, knows how it goes: Twenty varieties of malt liquor, potato chips, and frozen burritos and one bruised-up, waxy apple. Maybe a half-peeled onion. It’s so common that it’s almost a fact of life in America. Unhealthy food is as intrinsic to poor communities of color as are midnight gunshots and Newport cigarette billboard ads.”<sup>8</sup>*

This injustice is exactly why Oakland Planning Commission’s recent decision to grant city residents open access to empty lots is essential and why Master Gardeners and programs like VGF are indispensable. It was discovered in June 2014 that Oakland city staff had been under the mistaken impression that residents needed to obtain a \$3000 conditional use permit to grow food on empty lots, despite a change in city code by the planning department in 2011 about community gardening.<sup>9</sup> A mobilized initiative led by the Oakland Food Policy Council (OFPC) and 450 community signatories helped to push through legislation allowing residents to grow food without a permit.

Wrote OFPC on their blog after the November 5th, 2014 City Council meeting, at which the legislation was approved,

*“The real win has been the coming together of community, city staff, and decision makers to work collectively to make food a basic right in Oakland. In fact, not only food as a basic right but GROWING food a right, as well as sharing/selling it freely within our community. While OFPC has received much kudos for our work on this, we are only a few who reflect back the many that have been involved. This win is a clear example of how an activated public can create the policy solutions that meet our needs.”<sup>10</sup>*

That activated public is essential for continuing to change our food systems and establish greater equality in our neighborhoods and larger communities. This fight doesn’t stop with skills acquisition and land access. The entire food system is intricately tied up with related issues, explains Victory.

*“The thing that’s important is to eliminate poverty. We need jobs. We need education. We need food. We need housing, transportation. Those things are really important.*

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<sup>8</sup> Angela Bass, Puck Lo, and Diana Montañó, “Few Food Choices,” Oakland North, <https://oaklandnorth.net/few-food-choices>.

<sup>9</sup> Madeleine Key, “Confusion Reigns Over Oakland Urban Gardens,” *East Bay Express*, June 25, 2014, <http://oaklandfood.org/2014/06/26/confusion-reigns-over-oakland-urban-gardens>.

<sup>10</sup> “Urban Ag Campaign Update: The Real Win,” OFPC blog, November 6, 2014, <http://oaklandfood.org/2014/11/07/urban-ag-campaign-update-the-real-win>.

*When you talk about food systems, you cannot talk about it without those other things. These are things that are causing a lot of inequality, a lot of inequities. [. . .]*

*It's very important that we look at what's happening in all of our communities where there's some poverty, where education isn't happening the way it really should and could happen, and make those changes."*

Only once we acknowledge the inequality that exists and how it impacts knowledge, skills, and access can we actually work towards a more just way of living and eating. Often this begins with an education of self and seeing the barriers we carry within ourselves, then reaching outwards to tackle these barriers with support from our communities. OFPC has created a [Food Justice Curriculum](#) available on their website to help communities engage in solving tough issues together. In addition to programming abroad, Food First also offers a [Food Sovereignty Tour](#) right here in the Bay Area that examines food access, repairing degraded environments, and dismantling racism in the food system. Tools and experiences like these can provide a solid foundation for interacting with the food system and creating a more just community. And sometimes this work happens in the seemingly most unlikely, yet appropriate, of places.

In the words of Victory Lee, "I'll see you in the garden!"