

The Return of the Victory Garden

By UCCE Master Gardener June Wilcox of Calaveras County

At our last Master Garden Meeting, our speaker was Noah Crosson from Food Corps. Before he spoke about the work he does in Calaveras County school gardens, he asked, "How did you get passionate about gardening?" Several members mentioned that their first experience of gardening was in one of the twenty million Victory Gardens planted across the United States during World War II. At that time, families were encouraged to replace their lawns and flower beds with vegetables and fruits to alleviate the food shortages brought about by the war. Using local fruits and vegetables was also recommended, since road and rail transport were employed to move troops and equipment rather than food and other consumer goods.

The more things change, the more they stay the same! Today, with rising food prices in part caused by increased energy costs and drought, many home gardeners are seeing the benefit of growing beautiful landscapes simply by adding edible plants to ornamental gardens.

California's current drought conditions have also stimulated many of us to choose to use water more wisely in our gardens by transforming large expanses of water-hungry lawn into spaces to grow more vegetables, fruits and herbs. There is also a strong consumer demand for local organic produce. Master Gardeners encourage everyone to have a garden. The garden can be any size that will promote healthy growing conditions while maintaining water conservation.

As we see more community gardens and school gardens, the examples of the benefits are more and more evident. Students and parents are able to taste what is grown and learn how easy it is to grow your own produce. There are many perennial vegetables that will reward you with their bounty year after year. Add artichokes to your ornamental beds for a stunning display of silver-green leaves and magnificent thistle-like blooms. Strawberries make a beautiful and edible border for flower gardens, as do tiny Thai chilies and herbs like thyme and oregano. Fruit trees serve double duty by adding shade and structure to your garden. The leaves and fruits of pomegranates and persimmons provide are eye catchers in the fall. The Olive is an excellent tree for screening unwanted views and sports elegant gray-green foliage.

Interplant your garden beds with summer vegetables for color and interest: okra, which produces beautiful yellow flowers, eggplant and peppers. Winter greens such as the purple kales and Rainbow chard are also good options. With a little care and pruning, tomato plants can provide interest and wonderful fruit throughout the summer. To keep them looking beautiful, train these vines on teepees or other structures and prune away any yellowing leaves.

Edible flowers add color to your food as well as to your garden; Use the petals only. Suggestions to include: borage, calendula, chives, day lily, lilac, lovage,

pansy, pineapple sage, sunflowers (bud stage is tasty) and violets. Squash blossoms are a delicacy.

To bring this full circle, Calaveras Master Gardeners have a "victory garden" and hold regular open garden days at our site San Andreas. Be inspired while strolling through our vegetable garden, orchard and herb bed.

Master Gardeners are always on hand for advice and encouragement.

By June Wilcox, UCCE Master Gardener of Calaveras County.

Open Garden Days are the 4th Saturday of the month from February to November.

Visit our website at <http://ucanr.edu/sites/CalaverasCountyMasterGardeners/> for more