

H-Net Reviews

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Rose Hayden-Smith. *Sowing the Seeds of Victory: American Gardening Programs of World War I.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2014. 264 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4766-1586-8.

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Rose Hayden-Smith's book is an example of using history as advocacy. She provides the history of World War I-era gardening programs and institutions in America in order to illuminate solutions to current food and societal problems. For her, the history of gardening programs offers lessons directly applicable to present problems, which range from dietary issues like obesity and ignorance about where food comes from, to societal issues like community disintegration and poverty, to environmental issues like unsustainable agriculture and the loss of a conservation ethos. Great War gardening programs helped the nation overcome those problems during the war by drawing participants, dubbed "victory gardeners," into feeling connected to the overseas fighting by allowing them to contribute to the Allied cause. The programs instilled a land-focused patriotism and freed up food for shipment overseas. Victory gardeners went beyond feeling a renewed love for America as an abstract ideal by going on to regard their nation as a living thing, one that was grown in soil and in need of nurturing. The very success of these programs suggests that such a model can still serve the nation, which is, indeed, the main focus of the book. Hayden-Smith ends her book with a series of policy recommendations drawn from the way that gardening programs were implemented and were used, advocating for a national gardening program.

Hayden-Smith presents gardening as a unique form of engagement with food production that enjoyed a brief renaissance during the Progressive Era before reaching a climax during World War I. She traces the development of gardening to its origins as an idea held by progressive reformers that was successfully implemented during the

war as yet one more program to instill patriotism, but with the added goal of freeing up food for shipment to Europe. Before the war, famous progressives such as Gifford Pinchot and Liberty Hyde Baily sought to inculcate a citizen-producer ethic through the development of urban agriculture. This focus found an early home in women's education reform at the Pennsylvania School of Horticulture for Women at Ambler, PA, founded by Jane Browne Haines in 1907. Inspired by educational models found in England, she developed a school that taught women from urban backgrounds the skills necessary to garden. The students learned to apply their domestic experiences in food-based labor toward a greater civic engagement through growing crops and using local produce in their cooking. Gardening for victory grew from earlier efforts at schools like Ambler and maintained its close associations with reform, civic engagement, and women's work.

Hayden-Smith rescues World War I gardening from obscurity by showing how the progressive impulses that launched the more well-known food programs also found expression in small-scale agriculture. Long obscured by Hoover's Food Administration and the later, and more successful, World War II gardening programs, the earlier gardening initiatives receive long-needed attention in this book, including the two signature programs: the United States School Garden Program and the National War Garden Commission. National gardening advocates built on the voluntarism and associational state building common to other World War I progressive efforts. What makes gardening stand out, then, is its ability to unite so many desperate threads of progressive reform ideology and connect them to food production. As Hayden-

Smith explains, national gardening proponents used the war to address urban and rural divisions by instilling a producer ethic more common in agricultural rural residents within urban dwellers, as had been achieved with the Women's Land Army of America, a program that placed urban women in rural areas to work.

Yet, Hayden-Smith's approach comes at a cost. By extracting from the past answers designed to fit present problems, she too often sacrifices particular historical contexts to argue that what worked once will work again. As she puts it, "health, economic, ecological, and social issues involved in food production, processing, distribution, and consumption" link Americans from both eras, suggesting that what makes each era distinct matters less than what makes each era similar (p. 2). This might not be entirely convincing to historians, who might be more interested in the 1890s to the 1920s than in the 2000s to the 2010s. Additionally, the particulars of the original victory gardens are likely more significant than her approach suggests, and several questions remain about those particulars. Was the original program influenced by the daily work schedules of women victory gardeners

and of those who prepared foods for families in either paid or unpaid contributions? How much of their own time did they donate to growing food for others? Did that matter to the overall program? The answers are not so clear.

Hayden-Smith's excavation of a forgotten part of the history of the Great War is a welcome addition to the nascent field of food history. Historians may find important information in the book as long as they are prepared for the policy-oriented advocacy. Indeed, her account of the history the gardening programs of World War I seems directed more at policy leaders, garden enthusiasts, and scholars of modern food systems than at historians interested in World War I. She serves this audience well, drawing an abundance of connections between present problems and past solutions. Prospective readers will find useful information on both the history of World War I gardens and prescriptions for using gardening to fix the modern food system, in a book that mixes advocacy and scholarship in a way that occasionally interferes with itself.

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