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The Little Garden that Could

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The Obama family is celebrating the first anniversary of their new kitchen garden, but in my house we're putting two candles on the organic carrot cake and making a wish for our national food gardening future.

Two years ago this week, my family and I planted a little garden of our own in the middle of our front yard. As luck would have it, we live in a little white cape with southern exposure which allowed us to claim that we had planted something much more noteworthy: a new food garden on the south lawn of the "white house."

Although the major networks were not present for our groundbreaking event, that didn't stop us from growing some media coverage of our own. We produced a short Internet video of our white house garden planting [1] and used it to urge presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama to follow suit upon taking office.

The clip went as viral as a gardening video can hope to go, appearing on many busy websites and, ultimately, on national TV. Fast-forwarding to the present, I am happy to report that both "white house" gardens are flourishing and that a new food garden revival has taken root.

Like the Victory Garden movement of the previous century, war once again provides the context for this revival, but this time it's not nation against nation, but people waging a struggle for health, their own and that of the planet.

Whether the current home-grown revival sends its roots deeply and broadly enough in society to make a significant impact on social and environmental issues remains uncertain. According to a recent survey by the National Gardening Association, 1 million new food gardens are planned for 2010.

That may sound like a large number, but when it's compared with the estimated 20 million Victory Gardens planted in 1943 when the U.S. population was half what it is now, it would seem that we're only scratching the surface.

This brings me to my birthday wish. First lady Michelle Obama has been the best gift the food-gardening movement could ask for this past year, but I'm hoping that millions of new people will follow her example this year. To bring these new gardeners into the movement, we need to educate them about the diverse

contributions food gardens can make to families, communities, and our country's national security.

Many people, including policy-makers, think that a number of new little gardens won't add up to anything more than a hill of beans, but our history proves otherwise.

At the peak of the Victory Garden movement, gardens behind homes, schools, prisons, workplaces and in vacant lots were growing 40 percent of the nation's produce and helping to conserve financial and natural resources at a time of crisis.

Last year, my wife and I did some garden math of our own to offer a more contemporary example. We weighed, recorded and priced every item coming out of our yard, front and back, over the course of the growing season. By the time we were done, we calculated that we had saved over $2,200 and had met roughly half of our family's produce needs for the year [2].

And the food was not only delicious and low in carbs, but also low in carbon, having traveled less than 50 feet from plot to plate. Saving money is one financial incentive for growing kitchen gardens, but it shouldn't be the only one.

Each year, we manage to find billions of tax dollars to subsidize corn and soybeans, which are used to sweeten soft drinks and fatten livestock.

Surely some of those funds would be better spent sweetening the deal for gardeners through innovative fiscal incentives and grants for new school and community gardens.

We already provide tax breaks to encourage families to put solar panels on their houses, so why not encourage them also to grow solar-powered food behind those houses?

Whether we organize it now or it organizes us later, a food garden revolution is coming and that's a very good thing.

In fact, the only downside I see is a nationwide glut of summer squash, but hopefully many new gardeners will follow Michelle Obama's lead in sharing some of their bounty with neighbors in need.

Doing so would not only make for a better-fed nation but a more socially just one too. When it comes to the next healthy, home-grown revival, everyone should have a place at the table.

Roger Doiron of Scarborough is the founding director of Kitchen Gardeners International [3], a nonprofit group promoting home gardens.

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[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOXtNdQxGw8
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