

Raleigh Garden Club – 1940-59

The War Years

The early years of the Club ended abruptly with America's entry into World War II. The war changed life at home dramatically. Rationing and shortages were suddenly the norm for everyone, not just the poor. To save gas and rubber some city businesses, like the dairy, actually returned to horse drawn delivery wagons.

Food was uppermost in the minds of Garden Club members, rather than flowers. The program topics shifted to poultry raising, vegetables and food preservation. Famous Landscape Architect Ellen Shipman Biddle was a guest speaker on the "ideal" Victory Garden. The Club had a garden center at Briggs Hardware and gave demonstrations on canning and food preservation.

Growing vegetables and setting up Victory Gardens became the focus of the entire nation, as the Dept. of Agriculture in Washington announced a food shortage loomed ahead for Americans. A push was made in spring of 1943 to turn to the garden clubs of the nation to turn their knowledge to producing food. The victory garden movement was begun and was wildly successful. The war is known for bringing women out into the workforce, but without hard data it is safe to say that many more planted victory gardens. In the last year of the war Raleigh had some 4000 Victory Gardens. The movement was so successful, in fact, that farming interests denounced them as being in competition with themselves! But the Garden Clubs cleverly rebutted that "they were gardening for their own private tables, thus releasing the farmers production for the Allies and the armed forces."



Victory Garden propaganda

photo,source unknown

Not all peace time activities were abandoned. Some members actually had objections to changing the traditional focus of the Club on civic beautification in favor of war work. There was a feeling that members needed the peace and comfort of their gardens more than ever before to combat the stresses of war. “We need the peace and comfort of our gardens more than ever before to keep us normal in these distressing times... the garden club should retain its former identity, promoting civic beauty and doing everything as we always have done” [rephrased from Garden Club of America book, p.79] One gardener [GCA member Rebecca Pepper quote] wrote, “It seems to me we need most tremendously all the inspiration we have out of our gardens. We are all doing war work in some form or another. I hope very much that the Club will remain true to its mission.”

Another example from an issue of the British magazine Horticulture: “No apology is needed to draw attention to how invaluable flowers and plants can give in the keeping up of our spirits – and morale. If the garden had been given over wholly to the culture of vegetables, some of the peace and inspiration one draws from a garden of flowers would have been lacking.” In tours of the armed forces bases, it was remarked that “The most hard-boiled of the military have come to recognize the healing quality of flowers...” (GCA book – after landscaping? Need context)

And so flower shows were planned. In fall of 1942, Isabel Busbee wrote of plans to do a Victory Garden Harvest Show (proceeds to go to Emergency and Navy Relief funds). This was another national initiative, started by the Garden Club of America. It is estimated that some 20,000 Harvest flower shows were held in the US to raise funds.

The radio Gardening School of the Air offered topics on Lawns and Growing Roses. The civic improvement committee did a thorough check of the plantings of the Glenwood Esplanade and made replacements where needed. The Living Tree Contest was held as usual at the holidays.

In Spring 1942, Raleigh celebrated its Sesquicentennial, the 150th year since its founding, and the Garden Club held an open garden tour in honor of the occasion. There was also a parade. In a speech for the occasion, the city proudly described itself in an analysis by The News & Observer (4/26/42): "The notable characteristic of Raleigh has been its tremendous growth despite its lack of great industry. The capital strictly is a center of education, government, and culture." This was credited to its greatly expanded middle class, compared to other metropolises. There were relatively few super rich and equally relatively few truly poor in the city.