

Concerned about climate change? Plant a Victory Garden

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Catherine McDonnell-Forney has been growing food at her Minneapolis home for the entire decade that she's lived there. But now she tends a registered Climate Victory Garden.

"Climate change is one of the top issues for me," she said. "It affects all of us, and our ability to live happy, healthy lives. One way we can help is growing our own food and making healthier soil."

Last year, she saw an online ad for the Climate Victory Garden initiative developed by Green America, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. On its website, a YouTube video starring [fashion designer](#)/"Gangsta Gardener" Ron Finley and actress Rosario Dawson outline basic steps for regenerative gardening that restores soil and captures carbon, including "Ditch Chemicals," "Keep Soil Covered," "Encourage Biodiversity," "Grow Food" and "Compost."

"I was totally sucked in," said McDonnell-Forney. "It's a positive call to action, presented in a way to get more people on board and excited—not doom and gloom."

At 39, she's too young to remember the original Victory Gardens, part of the war effort during World War I and II. "But my dad remembers that his parents had a Victory Garden," she said.

During those conflicts, food was rationed. In addition, labor and transportation shortages made it more difficult to harvest and move fruits and vegetables to market. So the government encouraged citizens to plant "Victory Gardens" to provide their own fruit and vegetables.

By 1944, nearly 20 million Americans had answered the call, planting gardens that produced 8 million tons of food that year alone. But when World War II ended, so did government promotion of Victory Gardens.

About a year and a half ago, Green America decided the time was ripe to reboot the concept, this time in service to planet Earth.

"We wanted a campaign that addressed the climate issue—using gardens

as part of the solution," said Jillian Semaan, food campaign director for Green America. "Bring them back but this time for the climate and the environment. People want to help but they don't know how."

The initiative offers gardeners a tool kit with step-by-step instructions for planting a Climate Victory Garden and 10 carbon-capturing practices. There's also an online community where gardeners can swap information and advice.

So far, it's a small community—1,413 people have registered their gardens nationwide, including 43 in Minnesota, according to Semaan.

"It would take a lot of people doing this to make a significant difference," said Paula Westmoreland, owner of Ecological Design, Minneapolis and vice president of the Permaculture Institute of North America. "On the other hand, it's important that people have tangible things they can do. It's much better than just having a lawn. Gardens that sequester carbon are generally multifunctional and good for pollinators."

Yard To Table

McDonnell-Forney, a Hennepin County Master Gardener, was already growing fruits, vegetables and herbs at her home long before registering as a Climate Victory Garden.

When she and her husband, Nick Schroetter, bought the house 10 years ago, the yard was mostly lawn. Over the years they've replaced much of it with fruit trees, shrubs and [native plants](#) for pollinators in front. On their south-facing side yard, they've added five raised beds where they grow tomatoes, onions, garlic, lettuce, peas, beans, potatoes, peppers and squash.

Every year, she experiments with a few new crops. "I finally got

asparagus to take—I'm very excited," she said.

The couple also are trying their hand at growing mushrooms on inoculated logs, and have converted their backyard into a bee lawn, planted with a mixture of fescue, white clover and creeping thyme. "When I mow, it smells like thyme," she said.

They produce enough food to put something homegrown on the table for just about every meal during the growing season, she said.

That's good for their family (they have two young daughters) as well as the environment because they're not shipping produce from across the country, and they know it's healthy and organic.

"I could get E. coli from my own lettuce, but it's much less likely," she said.

As an experienced gardener, McDonnell-Forney views the Climate Victory Garden initiative as "permaculture lite—easily digestible stuff."

But that's important because many enthusiastic would-be gardeners lack know-how and are intimidated.

"A lot of us, like city kids, didn't grow up growing our own vegetables," she said. "It's a skill that a lot of us have lost, one that's important to learn.

"Gardening seems overwhelming to some people," she added. "But it's easier than people think it is. Plants just grow. It's what they do."

Her advice to newbies? "Start small. It's really rewarding."

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