



by Erica Jamieson

Backyard Gardens Offer a Sense of Security During COVID-19

Inspiration for Elaine Ranc’s backyard garden arrived via a school project. Her daughter Victoria and other students had been working with Mrs. Grant, the Morris Central School Environmental Studies teacher, to grow vegetables in the school greenhouse. After in-person classes were suspended due to COVID-19, Victoria was instructed to get her green fingers to work at home – and so the pair began growing potatoes, tomatoes, pole beans, greens, herbs, and a slew of other vegetables.

Across the Butternut Valley, there seems to have been a rush to get outside and garden this summer. Nationally, increased time at home and a dwindling trust in supermarket supply chains led to a resurgence of “Victory Gardens”, with people taking the issue of food security into their own hands. While small-scale agriculture is common in the Butternut Valley, when grocery stores in Oneonta faced shortages, many people looked for alternatives. For Elaine, what started as a school project became a question of how to stay prepared for the worst and provide for herself at home.

Elaine has learned how to dry and save seeds for next year and joined a homestead canning group on Facebook. “The whole idea of gardening to have enough for weeks of dinners, instead of a week or two, is more appealing, because you never know. Something like this has never happened in my lifetime,” said Elaine.

Elaine has also created a gardening club with her colleagues at Springbrook, working with people with developmental disabilities. Over the summer, they have watched their clients revel in eating homegrown produce. “For the challenges of the adults that I work with, it was nice

to see them recognize that ‘I did this.’”

For Eric Bankus, who lives with his wife and five-year-old son at Pastured Primitive Farmstead on Copes Corners Road, the goal to become self-sufficient emerged during the 2008 financial crash. Eric was enticed by homesteading as a way to safeguard his family’s finances. “We’re always looking for ways to look inward and do some things for ourselves, rather than spend money and go into debt,” he explained.

The same philosophy applies to his

“It has been fantastic! I can’t go anywhere and so I have lots of time to garden!” – *David Gibson, seasoned Gilbertsville backyard gardener*

COVID-19 experience. Eric and his family live on a 14-acre farm and raise sheep and pigs along with various produce. Their lifestyle helped the family avoid any shortages. “We lost a lot of the fun things we do in our free time, but our day-to-day stayed the same because of those choices about making food ourselves and being self-sustaining.” While trips to the store for grains are a necessity, the Bankus family plans to make cheese from the sheep’s milk, build up the root cellar, and stock the freezer with home-reared meat. Amid the disruption of routines and the systems that people rely on, home gardening endures and sustains.

Debi and Ed Cotten, both in their 60s, decided to reinstate their backyard garden after a five-year hiatus. “We had just gotten to where we were too old to bother with it, and too much work for

Board member **Stacia Norman** and grandson made sure their scarecrow was wearing a mask!

what we get out of it,” explained Debi, “but because of COVID we didn’t know what we would be facing.” Debi spent the summer making pickles, dilly beans, jam, zucchini bread and tomato sauce while Ed took care of the garden. Debi has enjoyed putting food away for the winter, but ultimately found the garden a welcome respite from pandemic-associated anxieties. “It was a good distraction,” said Debi. “This gave me a purpose, something to do pretty much every day, because there was always something that needed to be taken care of.”

These local families often found more than security, respite and joy in their gardens. Elaine loved learning and growing alongside Victoria. “When we dug up the potatoes, when they finally withered and we knew they were ready, it was just the warm feeling of going through the soil and finding, you know, gold,” she remembered.

Though the Coronavirus sowed uncertainty and anxiety throughout the Butternut Valley, it also reminded people to get outside and get planting. For many, growing food is a security blanket to carry them through uncertain times. Cultivating a garden can also bring people together, settle nerves, and – let’s face it – it’s fun.

