

# War Garden

by David Ackley

## Prizes Awarded for War Gardens

### **Nashua's Food Production Much Greater than a Year Ago—Ackley wins first prize**

“ The garden committee today awarded prizes for the best gardens [in the city]...Interest in gardening for the sake of food production was much larger than last year...The first prize of the silver loving cup was won by F.R. Ackley...

Mr. Ackley has been gardening for the past ten years, much as the first settlers did. He has cleared his land a little each year and now has a large garden full of winter and summer vegetables showing the results of care and hard work. In addition to keeping his garden free from weeds and insects, Mr. Ackley is clearing more land for a larger garden next year.”

“War Garden,” is an interesting term, almost an oxymoron. Are these gardens in service of the war, or its nemesis?

(No doubt accidentally, the story catches the lineage of our prosaic history: *much as the first settlers did*...Like Nicholas Ackley breaking the ground of Haddan in 1657 for the first time, to plant his own garden in the town he helped found. As Nicholas had, and Benajah after him, Fred might have migrated from his home ground , but Cutler, Maine and the farm he grew up on, and all that he'd learned and carried in his blood from those who came before was in those hands that wielded the hoe and teased sustenance from the ground.)

Much has been written about the beginning of Word War I, whose origins remain murky, with historians still disputing whether it was the Russians or Germans who started it, among other potential culprits. Sometimes it seems that it was less provoked than arose, all parties having agreed that the time was ripe for a cleansing dust-up, *the war* always ready to oblige with its presence. Little attention has been paid to its ending, which has been rather taken for granted as a result of reverses on the battlefield and deprivation at home:

That fall he harvested summer squash, bright yellow; shiny green bell peppers, and others yellow and red; crimson tomatoes for canning; cucumbers for pickling, the smaller ones for Lela's sweet bread and butter pickles and larger ones for quartering and mixing with dill, and others yet for piccalilli relish; white beans for shelling and drying. Mealy white potatoes to be put away in the cellar to be boiled and mashed, along with his own pumpkins for a pie on the Thanksgiving table, the notion of all chairs occupied as yet barely a hope. I can see him now, a tall, lean figure, home from work, standing for a moment in his overalls, lighting his pipe in the sunset that plays over the colors of the garden. There would be turnips, shiny white with their skirt of purple, deep red beets, pale, knotty rutabagas and parsnips. Enough, when canned or stored in the root cellar to feed the family, all seven (perhaps eight?) through the winter to come. A few decorative sunflowers nod their heads agreeably in a hint of breeze.

The German surrender took place only four months after my grandfather won the garden prize, just long enough for its place in the larger scheme of things to have been forgotten. He was, I'm sure, too concerned with other matters to notice the effects.

### **Enemy Succumbs to Allied Secret Weapon: Surrender Terms Announced**

It must have taken time for word to make its way across the seas through the lines and the ramparts of the enemy, first to the trenches and then back to the towns and cities, where millet gruel was beginning to seem a treat, and where the abundance boasted in enemy newspapers, first was considered mere propaganda and then a terrible advantage if true-- how to prevail against a country where one man, with his single efforts and a hoe could raise enough food for a family of seven for an entire winter! And in this single town were hundreds such! Millions across the sweeping land! It was impossible, *a devastating secret weapon!*

Despair succeeded hunger when reports came to Berlin from the front lines that in lieu of grenades British and French and American troops had begun bombarding the enemy trenches with cabbages and carrots. Morale crumbled. It was too much! Insult to injury( those root vegetables really hurt!) The enemy turned on itself; internecine vegetable warfare began, and attacking British troops reported finding eerily silent German trenches, filled with enemy corpses and blood-spattered rutabagas.

In the end , before the trickle would become a flood, it was said that the first German soldier skulking across No-Man's Land gladly gave up his rifle and bayonet for a white turnip in its skirt of purple.

In the twilight of the evening of November eleventh nineteen eighteen, his garden cleaned of its bounty, the brown soil resting for the spring to come, Fred contemplates the bare, fecund ground. Even if he'd known that his efforts had defeated the Germans, other merely human beings not unlike himself called " the enemy," he'd not have cared a great deal. It was enough that the son would come safely home, take his place at the Thanksgiving table, and begin recovering his life in the fruits of the father's labor.

