

Resources For Growing Your Own Crops

By D. Keith Crotz

As the worldwide economy continues to contract, seed orders to both mail-order and on-line seed companies continue to grow as much as 30 percent per year. From a postage-stamp raised bed in a back yard to large family production gardens, people today are growing more of their own food. This phenomenon is not unique, however; similar events occurred about a century ago. From the 1890s to the 1920s, seed companies grew and prospered as home ownership and the suburbs of America expanded hand in hand. People wanted the fresh taste of fruits and vegetables that they remembered from their grandparents' farms and gardens. But seed sales dropped off rather quickly, however, when people became a half-generation removed from rural life. Folks simply did not have the growing skills to be successful producing the broad range of foods that they remembered.

W. Atlee Burpee, J.J.H. Gregory and others solved this problem by publishing books on growing specific types of vegetables. The cause was further expanded by the Orange Judd Publishing Company. Instead of being mere pamphlets with broad sweeping generalizations, their books were very specific production guides. These guides provided detailed information such as cost of production, climate, soil fertility, growing, transplanting, insects, diseases, and expected yields. Information on seed varieties, as well as on their origin and development, was often included.

Today, we find ourselves in the same information vacuum that those publishers tried to dispel. As many folks try their hand at back-yard food production, they meet with limited success from the "big box" store transplants and seed rack packets. The efforts required just don't seem to measure up to the remembered joys of vegetable gardening. Unfortunately, going to the library or the gardening book section in a bookstore will probably only lead to frustration. Three very popular current gardening books, all from very good publishers, contain the following information for specific vegetable production: 2-4 pages on most popular vegetables, up to 8 pages on bean production, including, push, pole, lima and dry varieties...and that's it! There are generalizations for all vegetables included for plant disease and insect pests, but *no* specific information for each specific vegetable.

BEAN CULTURE, by Glenn Sevey, published in 1907 and still in print as late as 1920, contains 130 pages of very detailed information on the olericulture¹ of beans. The author offers the gardener 6 pages of learning about general conditions that affect the growth of beans, as well as twenty pages on insects and disease with illustrations that greatly benefit gardeners of all levels of experience. Sevey even cautions the reader about beans and their preferred geographic areas for maximum success in production. While the overall tone of the book is aimed at those engaged in field production, gardeners with any size plot will benefit greatly from this book. There is absolutely nothing "modern" that can match the information in this book.

¹ Olericulture can be defined as the cultivation of vegetables for the home or market.

Another book that will greatly assist vegetable gardeners is A.G.B. Bouquet's *CAULIFLOWER AND BROCCOLI CULTURE*. Published in 1929 with 125 pages, this book provides the vegetable grower with sufficient information to produce respectable heads of both these crops. The preface of this book addresses the need to assist specialty growers in production. (In nearly every article one reads today, there is mention of "specialty growers and their markets.") One of the real tricks to producing cauliflower, we learn, is that two-year-old seed will produce larger heads than "new" seed. Broccoli is less difficult to grow, and much of the book discusses similar methods which will succeed with this crop.

It does not require too many vines, and only a small space, to produce enough sweet potatoes to stock a root cellar or candy for Thanksgiving dinner. James Fitz's *SWEET POTATO CULTURE*, first published in 1886 and still available over thirty years later, contains 86 pages of techniques for anyone to be successful in growing this amazing and tasty root crop. All the necessary tips for slip production, fertilization and care through the growing season are clearly explained.

As a bookseller with over 25 years of experience with olericultural books, and as an organic farmer and gardener for the past 20 years, I am concerned when I think about home gardeners as they try to bring a crop full circle, from seed to table, with only a few pages of very general information to guide them. Trying to grow food for the table today, using the books currently available, will ultimately lead to frustration and disappointment. Employing the information found within the pages of these "dated" texts, however, gardeners are certain to find much greater success and satisfaction when putting food on the table.

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