MEDIA BACKGROUNDER

Digging for Victory

Between 1939 and 1945, Australia mobilised for total war. Australian forces served with distinction in the Middle East and Pacific and Australian civilians were mobilised on an unprecedented scale on the home front.

Rationing was introduced to help support the war effort. Everyday items such as flour, butter, meat, tea, clothes and petrol became increasingly scarce. These shortages had a major impact on Australian families.

Although in the early war years many Australian backyards had vegetable gardens, fruit trees and a chook shed, the nation faced a looming food shortage.

By 1942 the agricultural industry was struggling with massive labour shortages and there was a severe and prolonged drought and major shortfalls in imports of seed stock and fertilizers. The results were beginning to have a direct impact on the Australian home front.

Early in 1942 the Prime Minister John Curtin launched “Dig for Victory”, a publicity campaign urging Australian householders to grow their own vegetables as a contribution to the war effort. The press quickly picked up the campaign as did industry and community groups.

Others took to the idea afresh and turned over their complete front and back gardens to vegetable production, often selling excess produce to raise funds for the front.

The Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) came up with the concept of ‘Garden Armies’ with a major advertising push in July 1942. These garden armies soon attracted media attention and soon photographs of women in overalls wielding pitchforks appeared in the press, alongside articles calling upon growers to reach production targets such as 50 tons of onions for the front!

In Melbourne alone the number of ‘Garden Army’ recruits rose from 500 in June to several thousand the following month.

Many local councils organised gardening collectives and some provided incentives including awarding volunteers a badge with a three carrot design.

Towards the end of 1943 the fear of invasion receded and food production became more of a national priority. Despite improvements in the agricultural sector to meet war demands, home gardening continued to raise funds, build morale and feed local communities and families.