

Public Abstract

First Name:Allyn

Middle Name:Mary

Last Name:Mortimer

Adviser's First Name:Daryl

Adviser's Last Name:Hobbs

Co-Adviser's First Name:J. Sanford

Co-Adviser's Last Name:Rikoon

Graduation Term:SS 2007

Department:Rural Sociology

Degree:PhD

Title:Power in the Garden: Exploring the Lives of Missouri Farm Women and Their Vegetable Gardens During the Great Depression

Today, when fresh, canned, and frozen vegetables are plentiful and taken for granted, the home vegetable garden is regarded as something between a hobby and a luxury. But in the Great Depression of the 1930s, the household vegetable garden, which was primarily the responsibility of the farm woman, was an engine that helped many rural families pull through tough economic times. The home vegetable garden is an ideal place from which to explore women's agency, because it is not only a gendered site on the farmstead where women, particularly during this time period, were able to develop skills and knowledge to enable them to feed their families, but it also was a site that enabled them to participate in the economic welfare of the farm. This study examines the Depression-era vegetable garden and its value in helping to keep farm families off relief rolls and remain relatively self-sufficient. It also examines the role of the professional women--Extension home demonstration agents--who worked with farm women to develop and improve their gardening and canning capabilities. It documents the material culture of the Depression-era vegetable garden in an attempt to make readers aware of the often taken-for-granted tools, skills, and knowledge that women needed to grow groceries in the garden. This research uses two forms of data collection--archival research and personal interviews with eight women and one man, all who lived on farms in Missouri during the 1930s. Through transcribed interviews, the key informants described their gardening practices and their lives on the farm. Data collected by both methods supported the conclusion that the economic and social value of the household garden gave women a sense of accomplishment within the home and community. This study not only makes an important contribution to women's and gender studies, but also contributes to the history of gardening and to historical landscape preservation.