

Producer or consumer? The house, the garden and the sourcing of vegetables in Britain, 1930-1970

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Despite the discovery of vitamins during the early years of the twentieth century, and the promotion of fresh vegetables as a vital element of a healthy diet during the 1930s and 40s, Britain did not become a nation of domestic vegetable producers.¹ By the 1930s the incremental loss of vitamin C from harvested fruit and vegetables was well understood, yet domestic vegetable production was not promoted as a means of securing the freshest food.² Public health messages focused instead on the housewife's role as a discerning consumer and preparer of vegetables.³ By the latter half of the twentieth century, allotment holding was a declining pastime, and gardens were more likely to contain ponds, rockeries or patios than vegetable patches. My paper provides historical context to present day attempts to encourage home growing and community farming as a component of sustainable and healthy food systems, by asking why, in mid-twentieth-century Britain, the home production of vegetables was not recommended in print media, as a beneficial every-day practice.⁴ A focus on the period 1930-70 enables me to examine the representation of the home, the garden and the relationship between the two both in peacetime and under the emergency of war, and to understand why print media focused on the home as a site of consumption, not production, of vegetables.⁵ I will argue that in this period when many were setting up home for the first time in suburban estates, and others were becoming used to domestic life without live-in servants, the construction of ideas of domesticity in both home and garden helped to shape attitudes towards the procurement of vegetables.

Rachel Ritchie, Sue Hawkins et. al. have shown how women's magazines represent a significant, but under-researched element of twentieth-century print culture. One reason for historians' reluctance to use these sources has been what Ritchie et. al. saw as their 'composite nature'.⁶ I have studied both women's and gardening magazines to investigate the interplay between ideas of domesticity, gender and the boundary between the house and garden. The heterogeneity of magazine content is in this sense especially useful in tracing norms within British culture, such as that of the housewife as responsible for the cleanliness of the home, for the quality of the family's food, and for their health. In this paper, I will focus on two

magazines, *Woman's Outlook* and *Amateur Gardening*. I will explain how ideas of gendered domesticity were associated with both hygiene and nutrition. I will then go on to consider the impact of this association of women with the health of the family on the garden and the uses to which it was put.

Woman's Outlook, the monthly magazine published by the Women's Co-operative Guild, was a left-wing magazine campaigning for the rights of women workers and promoting women's involvement in civic life. Yet it also acted as a shop window for Co-operative products, representing women as discerning consumers both of food and of household goods.⁷ It therefore presents an interesting range of images of womanhood in mid-twentieth century Britain. I chose to look at *Amateur Gardening*, because the Wartime Social Survey in 1942 found it to be the most popular gardening magazine.⁸ It was a weekly publication catering largely for the new residents of the expanding suburbs, many of whom were cultivating a garden for the first time.⁹ It was targeted, even during the war, towards men.¹⁰ It also perpetuated the view that the inside of the house was a gendered, separate sphere, in the way it portrayed the garden as a realm for men. Images in both advertisements and articles almost always featured men, unless they were demonstrating garden equipment as light or easy to use.¹¹

My explanation of why the representation of domestic vegetable growing was not shown in print media as a component of peace-time normality in mid-twentieth century Britain hinges on the role of hygiene in framing perceptions of domestic space. Health was linked to vegetables, not only positively in terms of their vitamin content, but also negatively through their proximity to soil as a potentially harmful substance. The cultivation of vegetables, compared to other gardening practices, necessitates sustained contact with soil in a constant cycle of sowing, planting and harvesting. My research focuses on the place of soil within discourses of hygiene and health. Studying the USA, Nancy Tomes has shown how medical advice linking health to hygiene was propounded by both health reformers and



Figure 1 Logo of the Health and Cleanliness Council, from *The New Home, a Handbook for Tenants*, courtesy of Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

manufacturers of household goods in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such that concern about infection became a key motivation in everyday domestic decision making and practice.¹² Such advice was also prominent in Britain, with the municipal reforms of Edwin Chadwick and Joseph Bazalgette paving the way for work focusing on individual responsibility in public health, such as the Health and Cleanliness Council, a voluntary organisation, which produced educational materials between the 1920s and 40s, with its motto 'Where there's dirt there's danger' (see figure 1).¹³ Although Tomes argues that the 'germ panic' peaked in the USA around 1900, the linkage of hygiene and health was a common feature of both advice and advertisements in

women's magazines particularly. The impact of this can be seen in letters from readers. A *Woman's Outlook* letters page from 1950 contained advice on how to whitewash the house, a practice intended to reduce infection, whilst still providing treats for the children and glamour for the husband, so that he won't notice the disruption:

Try not to harass the family, and don't do too much whitewashing at once, and so get irritable and nervy. Get some special biscuits for the kiddies' tea, and don't forget to put on a pretty apron (and some lipstick and powder) to greet hubby when he comes in; then he'll be unmindful of the fact that he can't find his slippers or his pipe or his paper or the dog's lead or his seed catalogue. (Mrs.) G. Tonkin (Gillingham).¹⁴

Concern about hygiene played a significant role in the construction of the idea of domesticity in mid-twentieth-century Britain, with, as Ruth Schwarz-Cowan has shown, rising expectations of domestic cleanliness running in parallel with improvements in technology.¹⁵ The association of this domestic hygiene with femininity was emphasised particularly during the interwar period with the recognition by manufacturers and advertisers of the significance of female choice in consumption for the home. During the war, a Co-operative advertisement for soap showed a woman leaving for her 'war job' having completed her domestic tasks, thanks to the soap, her 'daily help' (see figure 2).¹⁶ Thus, the role of women in caring for the home was shown as a constant, maintained, despite the war, with the assistance of Co-operative products. Government propaganda also emphasised this

association of women with health, hygiene and the care of the home, with appeals to housewives to



Figure 2 *Woman's Outlook*, 9 October 1943, back cover, courtesy of the National Co-operative Archive.

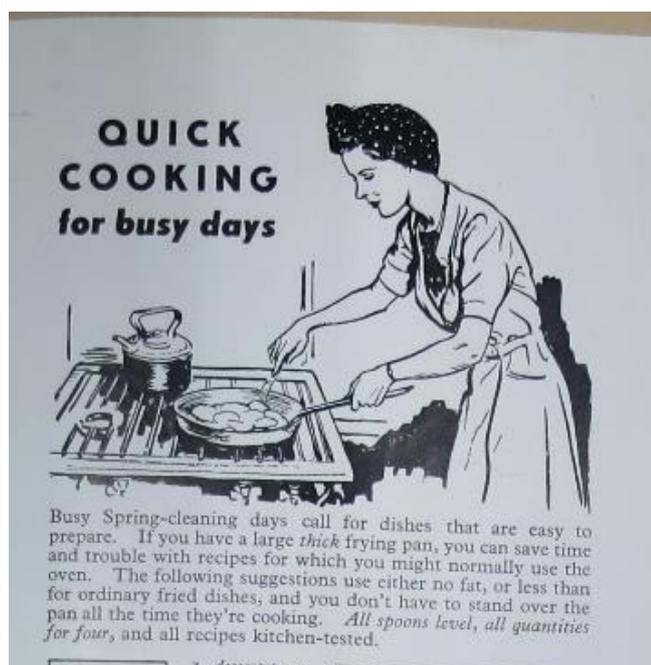


Figure 3 Ministry of Food, Album of Home and Women's Magazine Advertising, 1945-8, MAF 223/22, courtesy of The National Archives.

safeguard their family's health through good cooking, especially when they were spring cleaning (see figure 3).¹⁷ Angela Partington has shown how the association of women with domesticity was heightened in the post-war period of reconstruction, with the centrality of the 'social institution' of the family to the welfare state, and the flooding of British markets with consumer goods in the early 1950s as wartime restrictions were lifted.¹⁸ Advertisements linked the idea of women's responsibility for the home with hygiene and health. In 1960 a glamorous housewife, with a joyous sweep of the sponge, displayed her sparkling modern kitchen. The advertisement showed Co-operative Laundazone Power Bleach, which 'kills germs faster than ever' (see figure 4).¹⁹



Figure 4 *Woman's Outlook*, October 1963, 30, courtesy of the National Co-operative Archive.

boiling the whole can in water, as well as reports of tours of the Co-operative's hygienic and modern canning factories, which used pure tin, 'ideal for keeping foods pure and uncontaminated'.²²

Women were represented in *Woman's Outlook* as responsible for the family's nutritional health, as well as the cleanliness of the house. In the 1930s the Co-operative movement cultivated the image of the woman with the basket, the discerning shopper who bolstered the family's finances through the dividend. Articles and recipe pages also explained how to prepare healthy meals.²³ During the war, the theme of women's responsibility for the family's nutritional health was tackled by Leonora Crossley, in her regular column 'The Shopping Basket'. In addition, numerous recipe pages pointed out methods of preserving vitamins

It is my contention that, along with the appeal of modern, labour-saving products after the drudgery of the war years, concerns about hygiene underlay the transition experienced in British eating habits during the mid-twentieth century, as refrigerators, freezers and processed foods increased in popularity, and further that this concern about hygiene was intertwined with cultural conceptions of the safety of the home, and the role of women in ensuring that safety.²⁰ Packaged and processed foods were marketed for their purity as well as their nutritional value and convenience, meaning that not only were the family protected from potentially harmful substances in the food, but that their preparation would leave little trace in the clean, and by implication hygienic, kitchen.²¹

Woman's Outlook featured advertisements for 'Ready Cooked Peas' which were prepared by



Figure 5 Ministry of Food 'Home and Women's Magazine Advertising', 1945-8, MAF 223/22, courtesy of The National Archives.

whilst cooking vegetables. The Ministry of Food promoted the consumption of vegetables during the war in women's magazines, and continued its propaganda throughout the late 1940s, fearing that 'ignorance may well result in the paradox of greater food supplies but a less well-nourished nation' (see figure 5).²⁴ However, Dorothy Hollingsworth has written of the confidence of public health professionals in the post-war period that British people were eating well.²⁵ *Woman's Outlook* reflected this confidence, focusing on the convenience provided by modern food processing.²⁶ An article on the dehydration of vegetables reassured readers that they were 'very similar in nutritive value to the corresponding cooked fresh vegetable'.²⁷ Thus ideas of modernity, convenience and consumption were combined with reassurances regarding health.

Women were thus portrayed in print media as having responsibility for the health of the family, both in hygienic and nutritional terms. But what impact did these associations have on the portrayal of the garden, both in terms of who should use it, and what it should be used for? As we can see from this caricature (figure 6) who featured on a range of Crown Devon tableware in the 1950s, vegetable growing was often associated with men, with the bucolic, the old fashioned, as well as with economic hardship (for confirmation that this caricature is male, please refer to figure 7, a representation of femininity from the same range).



Figure 6 Image from Crown Devon's Gaiety Grill range of tableware, 1950s, in possession of the author.

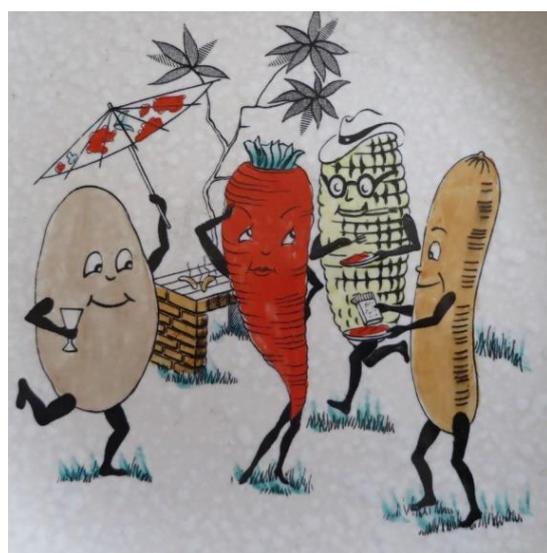


Figure 7 Image from Crown Devon Gaiety Grill range of tableware, 1950s, in possession of the author.

During the 1930s numbers of allotments were boosted not because of the new knowledge of vitamins, but due to the Quakers' campaign to set up unemployed men with land, tools and a worthwhile pastime.²⁸ Allotment holding was thus presented as a recourse in times of hardship, not a part of everyday life. Although anyone who was able was encouraged to Dig for Victory during the war years, information on vegetable growing in print media reduced significantly after rationing ceased in 1954. A fashion for labour-saving gardening, which used modern materials such as concrete was accompanied by a decline in the tenancy of allotments, prompting a government inquiry into their use in 1969.²⁹ I contend that an overlooked factor in this idea of vegetable growing as a practice for times of desperation, not suited to the modern world, was the sheer dirtiness of it, and that the role of this factor can be detected by tracing the portrayal of women in the garden in print media.

During the 1930s, *Woman's Outlook* did not discuss women gardening, there was no gardening page, and only occasional mention in articles of women who gardened as a hobby. Similarly, *Amateur Gardening* contained occasional references to lady gardeners, but largely conveyed the assumption that gardening was a hobby for men. Suburban gardens were shown with formal layouts, with shrub roses and a bird bath. The magazine generally avoided the issue of how choices in the garden might relate to practices in the kitchen.³⁰ The wartime campaign to encourage people to Dig for Victory was presented by the Government, and transmitted by the media, as a temporary duty, necessitated by the emergency of war and the subsequent period of austerity.³¹ Propaganda produced by the Ministry of Agriculture encouraged women to grow vegetables for the sake of their family's health, assuring them that they could 'get the older children to help'.³² In the late 1940s a poster for the Dig for Plenty campaign, which encouraged people to continue growing vegetables during peacetime austerity, showed a man digging, collecting manure and dealing with pests, whilst the woman keeps things clean, but actually checks her reflection (see figure 8). *Woman's Outlook* and *Amateur Gardening* devoted space to vegetable growing during the war. The former showed images of women outside, but not actually gardening, and did not discuss the suitability of the practice for women.³³ *Amateur Gardening* was unsure about the role of women in gardening, heading one editorial 'Cropping plans: their significance to the family man', whilst another referred to 'able-bodied folk' as potential diggers for victory.³⁴ An article on women's gardening work as the war drew to a close explained that there would not be



Figure 8 Ministry of Agriculture Poster, late 1940s, courtesy of The Garden Museum.

room for them in the trade, but they could continue gardening as a hobby.³⁵ A shift in the content of *Amateur Gardening* can be seen by examining the proportion of articles on flowers, vegetables and general matters over time. Flower gardening featured heavily in the 1930s, whereas there was a clear shift to the garden as a site of production during the war, and during rationing, with a swing back to flowers by 1957.³⁶ In these ways, both women gardening and vegetable growing were shown as necessary practices of war, not features of everyday life.

In the post-war period there was an acceptance in *Woman's Outlook* that the war might have led to more women gardening, with the introduction of a regular column 'In The Woman's Garden', but there was also an assumption that they were only interested in flowers.³⁷ *Amateur Gardening* however, reverted to its portrayal of gardening as a hobby for men, a sentiment emphasised by the introduction of a separate page for women giving advice on the indoor subjects of recipes and flower arranging.³⁸ A cartoon strip published throughout 1957 entitled 'The New Gardeners' at first glance seems to present an exception to the magazine's traditional separation of roles. A couple were shown carrying out a range of gardening tasks, including growing some vegetables. Although the woman did join in with gardening activities, clear gender distinctions were maintained both in text and illustrations. The woman was always shown asking the man what to do. She dressed glamorously. Her feet were hardly ever shown, but if they were, she wore feminine shoes and was pictured on a path or lawn. Any treading on earth was done by the man's boot. If the woman helped plant bulbs, she sat on a mat (see figure 9).³⁹ Thus, concerns about hygiene, about touching the earth, had become bound up in portrayals of gender and domesticity.



Figure 9 *Amateur Gardening*, 21 February 1957, 11, courtesy of *Amateur Gardening*.

This visual portrayal of a woman gardening, rather than posing in a garden for an advertisement, was rare in the post-war period. Whereas most print media in the late 1950s and 60s focused on the trend for labour saving gardening, *Amateur Gardening* was aimed at those who practised horticulture as a hobby, and thus was more likely to show it. Labour saving gardening arguably removed the need for any member of the family to touch the soil very much.⁴⁰ At the wealthier end of the spectrum, *House and Garden* showed the use of

gardens for swimming pools, whilst the *Ideal Home Householders' Guide* of 1966 illustrated various gardens with patios, ponds and paving.⁴¹ Meanwhile, throughout the mid-twentieth century, chemical companies marketed products associated with domestic hygiene, such as Izal and Jeyes Fluid, as solutions to garden pests and diseases.

This modern era of tidy gardens as well as houses allowed little room for the messy practices of domestic food production, let alone the entry of muddy vegetables into the gleaming kitchen. The mid-twentieth century saw continuity in the view of home vegetable production as a task undertaken out of necessity, either through poverty in the 1930s or due to war in the 1940s. Housewives, as the main decision maker regarding food procurement, were reassured that modern retailing practices, along with better home storage, could provide for their family's nutritional health.⁴² Women's involvement in vegetable production was almost always portrayed as a necessity of wartime. Once the period of austerity was over, women were shown returning to their role as discerning consumer of food and household goods. Whilst they may have ventured into the garden, these tended to be tidy, sanitised spaces. The strength of the association between hygiene, health and consumption had served to extend the domestic space out into the garden, and to encourage British people to be consumers of domestic products, rather than producers of vegetables.

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Notes

¹ On the discovery of vitamins: Dorothy Hollingsworth, 'Developments Leading to Present-Day Nutritional Knowledge', in Derek J. Oddy and Derek S. Miller (eds), *The Making of the Modern British Diet* (London, 1976), 189–95; On gardens in late twentieth century Britain: Twigs Way, *Nation of Gardeners* (London, 2010), 178–87; Jane Brown, *The English Garden Through the Twentieth Century*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1999), 208–39. The exceptions to the trend towards labour-saving gardening were stalwart allotmenters and, as Twigs Way points out, adherents of the organic movement. The latter group came into existence because of concern about the impact of industrialised farming during the war, and strongly linked vegetable growing and health. See: Matthew Reed, *Rebels for the Soil: The Rise of the Global Organic Food and Farming Movement* (London; Washington, DC, 2010); Philip Conford, *The Origins of the Organic Movement* (Edinburgh, 2001).

² Apart from early adherents to what would later be known as organic practices (see footnote 1 above), the only public body to promote home growing of vegetables in the 1930s was the Quakers, whose 'Allotments for the Unemployed' campaign provided assistance in terms of rents and equipment to establish unemployed men on an allotment. This campaign was thus intended as a solution to poverty, rather than to promote health: Lesley Acton, 'Allotment Gardens: A Reflection of History, Heritage, Community and Self', *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 21.0 (2011) <<https://doi.org/10.5334/pia.379>>.

³ For example, a series of talks on 'What is Good Food? Were advertised in *Public Health*, February 1936, 171-2. The National Federation Of Women's Institutes magazine *Home and Country* displayed a photograph of a touring exhibition on 'Right Feeding', which showed food groups but did not recommend how these foods should be obtained: April 1935, 193; Food surveys from the 1930s reported on purchased foods, with only occasional reference to 'allotment output' and 'cottage produce', in: John Boyd Orr, *Food, Health and Income; Report on a Survey of Adequacy of Diet in Relation to Income* (London, 1936), 54, 67.

⁴ The British government has promoted joined up working on sustainability and health, for example: All-Party Commission on Physical Activity, *Tackling Physical Inactivity - A Coordinated Approach*, 2014. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/achieving-sustainable-development>; The Wellcome Trust has campaigned on promoting public discussion of food and the environment: <https://thecrunch.wellcome.ac.uk/>; see also <https://www.sustainweb.org/growinghealth/>. The University of Warwick's Global Research Priority Food Group held a conference to discuss the future of urban gardening: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/priorities/foodsecurity/events/pastevents/criticalfoodscapes/>.

⁵ Charles Smith, *Britain's Food Supplies in Peace and War: A Survey Prepared for the Fabian Society* (London, 1940), 186. This emphasis on the purchase rather than production of vegetables continued into the 1950s, see Magnus Pyke, *Townsmen's Food*, (London, 1952), 162-63, 171-73.

⁶ *Women in Magazines: Research, Representation, Production and Consumption*, Rachel Ritchie et.al. (eds) (New York, 2016), 2.

⁷ The significance of the opinion of women to manufacturers and retailers of domestic products was recognised from the interwar period: Maggie Andrews and Mary M. Talbot, *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture* (London, 2000), 4; Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (eds) *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design* (London, 1989); Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester, 2015), 215.

⁸ The National Archives (TNA), Wartime Social Survey, 'Dig For Victory', An Inquiry in to the Effects of the 'Dig for Victory' campaign made for the Ministry of Agriculture in August and September 1942, RG 23/26, 29. This survey found that 47% of 352 respondents gave *Amateur Gardening* as their preferred gardening paper.

⁹ Peter Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home: The Suburban Semi and Family Life between the Wars* (Oxford, 2013), 11.

¹⁰ Margaret Willes, *The Gardens of the British Working Class* (New Haven and London, 2015), 327-28. *Amateur Gardening*, 7 March 1936, 23.

¹¹ *Amateur Gardening*, 6 August 1960, 19.

¹² Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass.; London, 1998), 17.

¹³ Christopher Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick: Britain, 1800-1854* (Cambridge, 1998); Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London, 1984); Health and Cleanliness Council, *Hints for the Busy Housewife* (2nd edn, London: Health & Cleanliness Council, 1927).

¹⁴ *Woman's Outlook*, 15 April 1950, 176.

¹⁵ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York, 1983); Scott, *Making of the Modern British Home*, 12.

¹⁶ *Woman's Outlook*, 9th October 1943, back cover.

¹⁷ Ministry of Food advertisement feature, late 1940s, Album of Home and Women's Magazine Advertising, 1945-8, The National Archive, MAF 223/22.

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- ¹⁸ Angela Partington, 'The Designer Housewife in the 1950s', in Attfield and Kirkham, *A View from the Interior*, 206.
- ¹⁹ *Woman's Outlook*, October 1963, 30.
- ²⁰ Derek J. Oddy, *From Plain Fare to Fusion Food: British Diet from the 1890s to the 1990s* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2003), 169–88; Miriam Akhtar and Steve Humphries, *The Fifties and Sixties: A Lifestyle Revolution* (London, 2002), 94–109. *House and Garden*, April 1955, 99.
- ²¹ *Woman's Outlook*, 3 September 1939, ii; *Home and Country*, March 1935, 155, 164. When self-service shopping was introduced by Sainsbury's, they produced an explanatory cartoon strip which emphasised the hygienic packaging of the dairy and meat goods: Oddy, *From Plain Fare*, 179.
- ²² *Woman's Outlook*, 3 September 1938, ii; 27 April 1940, 816.
- ²³ *Woman's Outlook*, 9 August 1930, 650, 665.
- ²⁴ TNA, Ministry of Food 'Home and Women's Magazine Advertising', MAF 223/22.
- ²⁵ Hollingsworth, 'Developments Leading to Present-Day Nutritional Knowledge'. See also *Public Health*, July 1953, 160-1; May 1954, 125; May 1955, 114. One experiment on evacuated children showed no comparable height or weight gain when children were managed by health professionals away from Salford conditions, *Public Health* July 1955, 150. In an article in *Public Health* 1957-8, 10-11, the priorities for health education were given as accidents and food hygiene, not nutrition.
- ²⁶ *Woman's Outlook*, August 1966, 22.
- ²⁷ *Woman's Outlook*, August 1960, 34-5.
- ²⁸ Acton, 'Allotment Gardens'
- ²⁹ W.E. Shewell-Cooper, *Cut-Work Gardening* (Kingswood, 1963); John Brookes, *Room Outside* (London, 1969); John Ernest Grant White, *Designing a Garden Today* (London, 1966), 158; *Ideal Home, Ideal Home Householders Guide* (3 volumes, London, 1966), Volume 1, 174; H. Thorpe, 'The Homely Allotment: From Rural Dole to Urban Amenity: A Neglected Aspect of Urban Land Use', *Geography*, 60.3 (1975), 169–83.
- ³⁰ The exception was A. J. Macself, *The Woman's Treasury for Home and Garden* (London, 1936), 101. This volume was produced and marketed by the publishers of *Amateur Gardening*, and made clear the housewife's responsibility to deal efficiently with the garden's produce. For a rare peacetime discussion within *Amateur Gardening* on deciding how much seed to plant according to how much was needed by the household, see *Amateur Gardening*, 7 March 1936, 948.
- ³¹ *Amateur Gardening*, 23 September 1939, 377.
- ³² Jennifer Davies, *Wartime Kitchen and Garden* (London, 1995), 78.
- ³³ *Woman's Outlook*, 9 March 1940, 582; 7 November 1942, 16.
- ³⁴ *Amateur Gardening*, 10 August 1943, I; front cover; 2 March 1943, 7.
- ³⁵ *Amateur Gardening*, 22 February 1944, 9.
- ³⁶ *Amateur Gardening*, whole issues for 7 March 1936, 8 March 1941, 5 March 1946 and 7 March 1957.
- ³⁷ *Woman's Outlook*, 12 March 1955, 31; 9 March 1957, 31; August 1960, 9; March 1966, 29.
- ³⁸ *Amateur Gardening*, 6 August 1960, 7.
- ³⁹ *Amateur Gardening*, 3 January 1957, 11; 2 May 1957, 12; 8 August 1957, 13.
- ⁴⁰ Fred Streeter, *Labour-Saving Gardening* (London, 1956); Cement and Concrete Association, *Concrete in Garden-Making* (London, 1960); Algernon Wincanton, *Cement and Concrete in Home and Garden* (Redhill, 1952).
- ⁴¹ *House and Garden*, Feb 1960, 66; *Ideal Home, Householders Guide, Volume 1*, 174. See also Brookes, *Room Outside*; Grant White, *Designing a Garden Today*, 158.
- ⁴² Pyke, *Townsmen's Food*, 170–71.