Opinion & Analysis

Why growing your own food is back on the menu

JOHN GIBBONS

Concerns about climate change and obesity as well as the recession have led to an increase in home-grown food

ALLOTMENTS HAVE long had something of an image problem. They conjure up pictures of mildly eccentric types in scruffy woolly jumpers pottering around absent-mindedly in the cabbage patch. In other words, it's not the kind of place you'd expect to find Michelle Obama, a quintessential city girl to her manicured fingertips.

Yet last week, America's first lady quite literally broke new ground when she donned her wellies and, hoe in hand, led a group of Washington schoolchildren in digging an organic plot in the White House gardens. She follows in the famous bootsteps of Eleanor Roosevelt, who in 1943 established what became known as a Victory Garden on the White House lawn.

Roosevelt's action – initially opposed by the US's own department of agriculture – caught the public imagination and helped galvanise an entire national movement towards wartime self-sufficiency. By 1945, 40 per cent of America's total vegetable output was being produced in gardens and allotments operated by 20 million members of the public.

Britain launched its Dig for Victory campaign at the very outset of the war, and by 1943, over one million tonnes of vegetables were being produced in gardens and allotments. This bounty played a crucial part in preventing mass starvation as Hitler's U-boats had disrupted much of its imported food supply lines.

At a time of its greatest crisis since the second World War, the symbolism of America's first lady once again rolling up her sleeves to lead a national movement back to the land is startling and underlines the sea change in US political leadership. Our relationship with food – long considered a fringe topic – is now, for a host of reasons, firmly back on the menu.

For decades, energy-intensive and highly mechanised industrial-scale farming has delivered copious quantities of low-cost food to the western world's tables. In this time, few have seriously questioned this production model. Times are, however, changing.

Concerns over climate change, pollution and oil depletion have chimed with growing public anxiety about the environmental havoc being wrought by over-use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides, as well as the obesity epidemic associated with the glut of cheap processed foods. And there are plenty of other human health hazards inherent in intensive food production, including the feeding of antibiotics to healthy animals. That a revolt against industrial farming is gaining momentum is borne out in Bord Bia data. Last year, sales of organic food in Ireland topped €100 million, an 82 per cent rise since 2006.

> "Shrinking your carbon footprint is one thing, but you also cut your food bills

"Organic agriculture enables ecosystems to better adjust to the effects of climate change," says the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation. Surprisingly, it adds that organic farming "performs better than conventional agriculture . . . both on direct energy consumption [fuel and oil] and indirect consumption [synthetic fertilisers and pesticides], with high efficiency in energy use". In other words, producing food properly isn't just good for you; it's good business too.

Our green-fingered Minister for Food and gardening buff, Trevor Sargent, was in Carndonagh, Co Donegal, this week to meet the residents of the Cill Bhride estate, which has just established 20 allotments. Cutting down on food miles and shrinking your carbon footprint is one thing, but you also cut your food bills and, with regular exercise in the fresh air, expect to see less of your GP.

It also involves putting down the roots for a deeper community life. As resident Joe McLaughlin says: "This allotment is about having a place where young and old can mix." Relationships need nurturing too. For children, there's the chance to learn where food really comes from and to experience the rich pleasure of eating foods they have helped to grow. The recession, he admits, has given the project a new impetus.

Apart from getting to know the neighbours, the allotment movement entails building local resilience and co-operation in turbulent times. With increasing uncertainty about the long-term viability of the complex global food web, communities are beginning to take up their trowels and take back responsibility for their own food security. Far from being elitist or eccentric, "allotments are now springing up in areas that are cash-poor but time-rich", Sargent told me. Thousands more will find themselves time-rich by the end of this year, many for the first time in their working lives. "This is one of the more positive reactions to recessionary times. It's about moving from despair and towards helping create a future for ourselves and our kids."

What's good for humans can also benefit our fellow creatures. For instance, companion planting involves combining plants that can attract or deter other insects or pests.

A well-organised allotment or garden will attract insects, and the blue tits and robins that eat them. And while they're in the neighbourhood, these flying gardeners will also help deal with your caterpillars, greenfly and aphids. With a third of supermarket-bought produce thrown out uneaten, we may be witnessing a timely return to sanity in our relationship with food.

Dorothy Gurney's short poem which I remember from childhood captures its exquisite essence: "The kiss of the sun for pardon; the song of the birds for mirth. One is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on Earth."

For more information, visit allotments.ie or getgrowing.ie, which launches this Sunday