

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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The COVID Generation

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My dear old dad, Deane, gone now for almost six years, lived his 96-plus years about as frugally as one can while raising four ungrateful kids. Born in 1919, he was an Air Force veteran and MIT-educated mechanical engineer who no doubt made decent money and could have splurged on himself now and again with a nicer car or better set of golf clubs. But he didn't because he grew up during the Great Depression.

Dad's motto was "Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without." He spent his life muttering about lights left on and fridge doors left open too long. I fondly remember him mixing up a dab of epoxy with which to repair something, then going around the house looking for something else to fix with the remaining tiny bit left over. (He mixed it on an old jar lid, a trick I still use today.)

You're no doubt smiling right now with your own recollections of Depression-era parents or grandparents and their frugality. Jen Zurko told me her grandmother adds a splash of water to the dishwashing detergent bottle to use up the last remaining drops of soap.

Knowing how big an impact the Great Depression had on an entire generation of folks (dubbed "The Greatest Generation" by Tom Brokaw), my main curiosity about the pandemic is what impact it will have on the current generation of young people. What will be the long-term effect on today's 10- and 15- and 20-year-olds, especially as it relates to gardening?

Doing a bit of reading on the topic, I stumbled across an essay by Barry Glassner and Morton Schapiro on the website "Inside Higher Ed." Dated October 12, 2020, the piece, titled "The Greatest Generation Redux?", finds many parallels between the life experiences of today's high school- and college-age kids and those of the greatest generation born 80 years prior.

Think about it: My dad, who was born just at the time of the Spanish Flu pandemic (his mother died of the flu three months after he was born) saw the Roaring '20s, endured the Great Depression, and then World War II and the Cold War. His Gen-Z great-grandchildren were born into the terrorism of September 11, the wackiness of Y2K, the dot.com bust, the Great Recession and now the first global pandemic in 100 years. Does this mean we're producing another "greatest generation"? Some experts have posed that possibility, even before the pandemic.

So far, the only online reports I can find about young people and the pandemic revolve around anxiety, depression,

loneliness, economic hardships and so on. It makes me wonder: Did anyone worry about those things on behalf of the youth of the 1930s? I highly doubt it.

In the essay I read, the authors quoted writer Caitlin Flanagan, who compared students of today who missed out on high school and college graduations to her father and his generation after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The men left school to go to war, the women had to take over the factories and farms. Shortages and rationing lasted for years. Talk about life-altering! Yet by the '50s the GIs were building a new suburban America, discovering sports cars and computers and, well, you know the rest of the story—they wound up being dubbed the Greatest Generation.

But the depression left them frugal and not inclined to spend unnecessarily. They saved seed and shared plants and reused flowerpots. It also taught them to be self-sufficient and to work hard, which meant caring for their new suburban landscapes was a pleasure, and a respite from the poor, war-torn days of the past.

What about today's youth? Tom Brokaw wrote that the Greatest Generation had to learn at a young age "to accept a future that played out one day at a time." The same could be said of today's teens and young adults. They'll remember the fear of disease, which will probably make them more health conscious. They'll know what it's like to stay home for an extended period, which will make them value a comfortable home setting, but also, I think, give them an appreciation of the freedom to travel—something many of us took for granted.

And as for the garden? I'm hoping the seclusion and safety of a private garden space, the pleasure of the open air, the beauty of houseplants and garden flowers, and the health benefits of home-grown food will stick with these kids long after they've forgotten the impromptu "Today, we're going to plant a garden!" homeschool lesson arranged by mom in 2020. **GT**