

NEW ZEALAND'S HOME PRODUCTION OF POTATOES AND VEGETABLES IN THE 1950S.

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There is a general consensus among historians and laypeople that New Zealand's backyards in the 1950s were productive. Helen Leach and Paul Walker both maintained in their histories of New Zealand home gardening that vegetable plots and fruit trees were the norm.¹ Keith Sinclair and James Belich in their more general histories both accepted New Zealand suburbs were productive.²

And yet, in 1956, New Zealand experienced a massive shortage of potatoes, a staple of the national diet—one of the proverbial 'three vege' to have with your meat. The shortage was so bad that Canterbury farmers posted armed guards on their fields to prevent thefts, Auckland newspapers reported panic buying of potatoes, and grocery stores posted notices that only regular customers would be served potatoes.³ The Minister of Agriculture, Keith Holyoake, pleaded with New Zealanders to eat fewer

¹ Helen Leach, *1,000 Years of Gardening in New Zealand*. AH & AW Reed, Wellington, 1984. p. 123; Paul Walker, Towards the Modern Garden, in Matthew Bradbury, ed., *A History of the Garden in New Zealand*. Viking/Penguin, Auckland. 1995. pp. 153–171.

² Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, 4th ed. Penguin, Auckland. 2000. p. 313; James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders: From the 1880s to the Year 2000*. Penguin, Auckland. 2001. p. 350.

³ Armed Guards on Potatoes: Farms Robbed in Night Forays, *New Zealand Herald*, Apr. 2, 1956, p. 8; Public Buying in Panic, says Merchant, *New Zealand Herald*, Apr. 7, 1956, p. 12.

potatoes.^{4,5} And this wasn't New Zealand's first potato shortage. Although shortages had, unsurprisingly, occurred during the Second World War, they had also occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

These two concepts could be seen as being in conflict with each other; New Zealand was so productive, that our backyards were spilling over with produce but, at the same time, a shortage of commercially grown potatoes could send the nation into a tailspin.

Part of the problem is that historians have not provided much evidence to support the belief that our backyards were productive, and have accepted it as a given. They have provided even less discussion as to why New Zealanders grew vegetables.

Fortunately, the New Zealand census of 1956 can help. Possibly prompted by the potato shortages of the 1940s and 1950s, the 1956 census asked each household to indicate what proportion of their household potato and vegetable needs they grew. The categories were: *All, Three-quarters, Half, Quarter, Under a Quarter* and *Nil*.⁶

The census results showed:

8% of households grew *all* of their vegetable needs.
23% grew a significant proportion, a *half* to *three-quarters*.
30% grew some, estimating a *quarter* or *less* of their needs and
39% of households did *not* grow vegetables at all.⁷

These numbers indicate that a little over 30% of New Zealand households in 1956 produced a substantial quantity of vegetables—enough to have

⁴ Eat Fewer Potatoes is Minister's Plea, *New Zealand Herald*, Apr. 7, 1956, 12.

⁵ At the presentation of this paper, an audience member quite rightly pointed out that this could have been an exaggeration by the newspapers. As I have since lived through the great toilet paper and flour shortages of 2020, I think there is some truth in this, and it may need exploring more fully that I can in this paper.

⁶ Department of Statistics, 'Dwellings and Households', *New Zealand Population Census 1956*, Wellington, 1956, 24.