

Growing Power in an Urban Food Desert

by Roger Bybee, YES! Magazine

Founded by MacArthur Foundation “genius” fellow Will Allen, Growing Power is an active farm producing tons of food each year, a food distribution hub and a training center. It’s also the home base for an expanding network of similar community food centers, including a Chicago branch run by Allen’s daughter, Erika.



Will & Erika Allen

Growing Food - Since 1993, Allen has focused on developing Growing Power’s urban agriculture project, which grows vegetables and fruit in its greenhouses, raises goats, ducks, bees, turkeys, and in an aquaponics system designed by Allen, Tilapia and Great Lakes Perch, altogether, 159 varieties of food.

Growing Power also has a 40-acre rural farm in Merton, 45 minutes outside Milwaukee, with five acres devoted to intensive vegetable growing and the balance used for sustainably grown hays, grasses, and legumes which provide food for the urban farm’s livestock.

Growing Power composts more than 6 million pounds of food waste a year, including the farm’s own waste, material from local food distributors, spent grain from a local brewery, and the grounds from a local coffee shop. Allen counts as part of his livestock the red wiggler worms that turn that waste into “Milwaukee Black Gold” worm castings.

Allen designed an aquaponics system, built for just \$3,000, a fraction of the \$50,000 cost of a commercially-built system. In addition to Tilapia, a common fish in aquaculture, Allen also grows yellow perch, a fish once a staple of the Milwaukee diet. Pollution and overfishing killed the Lake Michigan perch fishery; Growing Power will soon make this local favorite available again. The fish are raised in 10,000-gallon tanks where 10,000 fingerlings grow to market size in as little as nine months.



Allen tending to his aquaponics systems

But the fish are only one product of Allen’s aquaponics system. The water from the fish tanks flows into a gravel bed, where the waste breaks down to produce nitrogen in a form plants can

use. The gravel bed supports a crop of watercress, which further filters the water. The nutrient-rich water is then pumped to overhead beds to feed crops of tomatoes and salad greens.

The plants extract the nutrients while the worms in the soil consume bacteria from the water, which emerges virtually pristine and flows back into the fish tanks. This vertical growing system multiplies the productivity of the farm’s limited space.

“Growing Power is probably the leading urban agricultural project in the United States,” says Jerry Kaufman, a professor emeritus in urban and regional planning at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. “Growing Power is not just talking about what needs to be changed, it’s accomplishing it.”

Oasis in a Food Desert – The store at Growing Power’s Milwaukee farm is the only place for miles around that carries fresh produce, free-range eggs, grass-fed beef, and home grown honey. Even in winter, customers find the handmade shelves and aging coolers stocked with fresh-picked salad greens.

Growing Power co-director Karen Parker, who has worked alongside Allen since the project started, says, “It’s a wonderful thing to change people’s lives through changing what they’re eating.” Parker believes her parents would have lived much longer with a healthier diet. She takes a deep pride in providing fresh, healthy food. “Last summer during the salmonella problem with tomatoes, I was able to tell customers, ‘You don’t have to worry.

These tomatoes were grown right here.' I found myself selling out of tomatoes."

Growing Power supplements its own products with food from the Rainbow Farming Cooperative, which Allen started at the same time as Growing Power. The cooperative is made up of about 300 family farms in Wisconsin, Michigan, Northern Illinois, and the South. The southern farmers, who are primarily African-Americans, make it possible to offer fresh fruits and vegetables year-round. The produce goes into Growing Power's popular Farm-to-City Market Baskets. A week's worth of 12-15 varieties of produce costs \$16. A \$9 "Junior/Senior" basket, with smaller quantities of the same produce, is also available.

Growing Power is also a source of 35 good-paying jobs in an area of high unemployment. The staff of Growing Power is highly diverse—a mixture of young and old,

African-American, white, Asian, Native American, and Latino, with remarkably varied work histories. All live nearby. Co-director Karen Parker, a high-energy African-American woman who radiates warmth whether greeting her 6-year-old granddaughter or welcoming a volunteer, notes that some staff are former professionals who left the high-stress environments of corporations, social work, and other fields. At Growing Power they find a new kind of fulfillment in the blend of hard physical labor and thoughtful planning based on scientific research. Others are former blue-collar workers, farmers, or recent college graduates. All find satisfaction in transforming how Americans eat.

Growing Power in Chicago - The largest application of Growing Power's model is in Chicago, where Erika Allen, Will's daughter, is carrying on the family tradition. The Chicago project started in the Cabrini-Green public housing project, where Growing Power's techniques helped

the Fourth Presbyterian Church transform a basketball court into a flourishing community garden fueled by Will Allen's beloved red worms. Growing Power also has a half-acre farm in Grant Park, in the heart of downtown Chicago. The Grant Park project focuses on job training for young people, involving them in all aspects of growing the 150 varieties of heirloom vegetables, herbs, and edible flowers the farm sells in Chicago farmers markets and through the Farm-to-City Market Basket program, like the one pioneered in Milwaukee.

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