

Street Farmer

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Will Allen, a farmer of Bunyonesque proportions, ascended a berm of wood chips and brewer's mash and gently probed it with a pitchfork. "Look at this," he said, pleased with the treasure he unearthed. A writhing mass of red worms dangled from his tines. He bent over, raked another section with his fingers and palmed a few beauties.



Nigel Parry for The New York Times
Will Allen

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An Urban Farmer Is Rewarded for His Dream (October 1, 2008)

It was one of those April days in Wisconsin when the weather shifts abruptly from hot to cold, and Allen, dressed in a sleeveless hoodie — his daily uniform down to 20 degrees, below which he adds another sweatshirt — was exactly where he wanted to be. Show Allen a pile of soil, fully composted or still slimy with banana peels, and he's compelled to scoop some into his melon-size hands. "Creating soil from waste is what I enjoy most," he said. "Anyone can grow food."

Like others in the so-called good-food movement, Allen, who is 60, asserts that our industrial food system is depleting soil, poisoning water, gobbling fossil fuels and stuffing us with bad calories. Like others, he advocates eating locally grown food. But to Allen, local doesn't mean a rolling pasture or even a suburban garden: it means 14 greenhouses crammed onto two acres in a working-class neighborhood on Milwaukee's northwest side, less than half a mile from the city's largest public-housing project.

And this is why Allen is so fond of his worms. When you're producing a quarter of a million dollars' worth of food in such a small space, soil fertility is everything. Without microbe- and nutrient-rich worm castings (poop, that is), Allen's [Growing Power farm](#) couldn't provide healthful food to 10,000 urbanites — through his on-farm retail store, in schools and restaurants, at farmers' markets and in low-cost market baskets delivered to neighborhood pickup points. He couldn't employ scores of people, some from the nearby housing project; continually train farmers in intensive polyculture; or convert millions of pounds of food waste into a version of black gold.

With seeds planted at quadruple density and nearly every inch of space maximized to generate exceptional bounty, Growing Power is an agricultural Mumbai, a supercity of upward-thrusting tendrils and duct-taped infrastructure. Allen pointed to five tiers of planters brimming with salad greens. "We're growing in 25,000 pots," he said. Ducking his 6-foot-7 frame under one of them, he pussyfooted down a leaf-crammed aisle. "We grow a thousand trays of sprouts a week; every square foot brings in \$30." He headed toward the in-ground fish tanks stocked with tens of thousands of tilapia and perch. Pumps send the dirty fish water up into beds of watercress, which filter pollutants and trickle the cleaner water back down to the fish — a symbiotic system called aquaponics. The watercress sells for \$16 a pound; the fish fetch \$6 apiece.

Onward through the hoop houses: rows of beets and chard. Out back: chickens, ducks, heritage turkeys, goats, beehives. While Allen narrated, I nibbled the scenery — spinach, arugula, cilantro.

If inside the greenhouse was Eden, outdoors was, as Allen explained on a drive through the neighborhood, "a food desert." Scanning the liquor stores in the strip malls, he noted: "From the housing project, it's more than three miles to the Pick'n Save. That's a long way to go for groceries if you don't have a car or can't carry stuff. And the quality of the produce can be poor." Fast-food joints and convenience stores selling highly processed, high-calorie foods, on the other hand, were locally abundant. "It's a form of redlining," Allen said. "We've got to change the system so everyone has safe, equitable access to healthy food."

Propelled by alarming rates of diabetes, heart disease and obesity, by food-safety scares and rising awareness of industrial agriculture's environmental footprint, the food movement seems finally to have met its moment. First Lady [Michelle Obama](#) and Secretary of Agriculture [Tom Vilsack](#) have planted organic vegetable gardens. Roof gardens are sprouting nationwide. Community gardens have waiting lists. Seed houses and canning suppliers are oversold.

Allen, too, has achieved a certain momentum for his efforts to bring the good-food movement to the inner city. In the last several years, he has become a darling of the foundation world. In 2005, he received a \$100,000 [Ford Foundation](#) leadership grant. In 2008, the [MacArthur Foundation](#) honored Allen with a \$500,000 "genius" award. And in May, the Kellogg Foundation gave Allen \$400,000 to create jobs in urban agriculture.

Today Allen is the go-to expert on urban farming, and there is a hunger for his knowledge. When I visited Growing Power, Allen was conducting a two-day workshop for 40 people: each paid \$325 to learn worm composting, aquaponics construction and other farm skills. "We need 50 million more people growing food," Allen told them, "on porches, in pots, in side yards." The reasons are simple: as oil prices rise, cities expand and housing developments replace farmland, the ability to grow more food in less space becomes ever more important. As Allen can't help reminding us, with a mischievous smile, "Chicago has 77,000 vacant lots."

Allen led the composting group to a pair of wooden bins and instructed his students to load them with hay. "O.K., you've got your carbon," he said. "Where are you going to get your nitrogen?"

"Food waste," a young man offered, wiping his brow. Allen pointed him toward a mound of expired asparagus collected from a wholesaler. As the participants layered the materials in a bin, Allen drilled them: "How much of that food is solid versus water weight?" "Why do we water the [compost](#)?" The farmers in training hung on every word.

If Allen at times seems a bit weary — he recites his talking points countless times a day — he comes alive when he's digging, seeding and watering. His body straightens, and his face brightens. "Sitting in my office isn't a very comfortable thing for me," he told me later, seated in his office. "I want to be out there doing physical stuff."

Which includes basic research. Warned by experts that his red wigglers would freeze during Milwaukee's long winter, Allen studied the worms for five years, learning their food and shelter preferences. "I'd run my experiments over and over and over — just like an athlete operates." Then he worked out systems for procuring wood chips from the city and food scraps from markets and wholesalers. Last year, he took in six million pounds of spoiled food, which would otherwise rot in landfills and generate methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Every four months, he creates another 100,000 pounds of compost, of which he uses a quarter and sells the rest.

Uncannily, Allen makes such efforts sound simple — fun even. When he mentions that animal waste attracts soldier flies, whose larvae make terrific fish and chicken feed, a dozen people start imagining that growing grubs in buckets of manure might be a good project for them too. "Will has a way of persuading people to do things," Robert Pierce, a farmer in Madison, Wis., told me. "There's a spirit in how he says things; you want to be part of his community."

Allen owes part of his Pied Piper success to his striking physicality and part to his athlete's confidence — he's easeful in his skin and, when not barking about nitrogen ratios, incongruously gentle. He told me about his life one afternoon as we drove in his truck, which was sticky with soda and dusted with doughnut powder, to Merton, a suburb of Milwaukee where Growing Power leases a 30-acre plot. "My father was a sharecropper in South Carolina," Allen said. "He was the eldest boy of 13 children, and he never learned to read." In the 1930s, he moved near Bethesda, Md. "My mother did domestic work, and my father worked as a construction laborer. But he rented a small plot to farm."

A talented athlete, Allen wasn't allowed to practice sports until he finished his farm chores. "I had to be in bed early, and I thought, There's got to be something better than this." For a while, there was. Allen accepted a basketball scholarship from the [University of Miami](#). There, he married his college sweetheart, Cyndy Bussler. After graduating, he played professionally, briefly in the American Basketball Association in Florida and then for a few seasons in Belgium. In his free time, Allen would drive around the countryside, where he couldn't help noticing the compost piles.

"I started hanging out with Belgian farmers," Allen said. "I saw how they did natural farming," much as his father had. Something clicked in his mind. He asked his team's management, which provided housing for players, if he could have a place with a garden. Soon he had 25 chickens and was growing the familiar foods of his youth — peas, beans, peanuts — outside Antwerp. "I just had to do it," he said. "It made me happy to touch the soil." On holidays, he cooked feasts for his teammates. He gave away a lot of eggs.

After retiring from basketball in 1977, when he was 28, Allen settled with his wife and three children in Oak Creek, just south of Milwaukee, where Cyndy's family owned some farmland. "No one was using that land, but I had the bug to grow food," Allen said. As his father did, Allen insisted that his children contribute to the household income. "We went right to the field at the end of the school day and during summer breaks," recalled his daughter, Erika Allen, who now runs Growing Power's satellite office in Chicago. "And let's be clear: This was farm labor, not chores."

Allen grew food for his family and sold the excess at Milwaukee's farmers' markets and in stores. Meanwhile, he worked as a district manager for Kentucky Fried Chicken, where he won sales awards. "It was just a job," he said. "I was aware it wasn't the greatest food, but I also knew that people didn't have a lot of choice about where to eat: there were no sit-down restaurants in that part of the city."

In 1987, Allen took a job with Procter & Gamble, where he won a marketing award for selling paper goods to supermarkets. "The job was so easy I could do it in half a day," he says now. That left more time to grow food. By now, Allen was sharing his land with [Hmong](#) farmers, with whom he felt some kinship after concluding that white shoppers were spurning their produce at the farmers' market. Allen was also donating food to a local food pantry. "I didn't like the idea of people eating all that canned food, that salty stuff." When he brought in his greens, he said, "it was the No. 1 item selected off that carousel — it was like you couldn't keep them in."

After a restructuring in 1993, P&G shifted Allen to analyzing which products sold best in supermarkets. He was good at that too: "I won sales awards six times in one year."

Driving across his Merton field, Allen smiled. Suddenly, I got it: Allen was a genius at selling — fried chicken, Pampers, arugula, red wigglers, you name it. He could push his greens into corporate cafeterias, persuade the governor to help finance the construction of an anaerobic digester, wheedle new composting sites from urban landlords, persuade Milwaukee's school board to buy his produce for its public schools and charm the blind into growing sprouts. ("I was cutting sprouts in the dark one night," Allen said, "and I realized you don't need sight to do this.")

After parking his truck at the field's edge, Allen made an arthritic beeline for a mound of compost. "Oh, this is good," he said, digging in with his hands. "Unbelievable." He saluted a few volunteers, whom he had appointed to pluck shreds of plastic from the compost under the hot noonday sun. He turned to scan the field, dotted with large farm-unfriendly rocks.

The rocks gave me pause: didn't millions of Americans leave farms for good reason? The work is hard, nature can be cruel and the pay is low; most small farmers work off-farm to make ends meet. The appeal of such labor to people already working low-wage, long-hour jobs — the urban dwellers Allen most wants to reach — is not immediately apparent. And there is something almost fanciful in exhorting a person to grow food when he lives in an apartment or doesn't have a landlord's permission to garden on the roof or in an empty lot.

"Not everyone can grow food," Allen acknowledged. But he offers other ways of engaging with the soil: "You bring 30 people out here, bring the kids and give them good food," he said, "and picking up those rocks is a community event."

Of course, if rock picking or worm tending — either here or in a community garden — doesn't attract his Milwaukee neighbors, it's easy enough for them to order a market basket or shop at his retail store, which happens to sell fried pork skin as well as collard greens. "Culturally appropriate foods," Allen calls them. And the doughnuts in his truck? "I'm no purist about food, and I don't ask anyone else to be," he said, laughing. "I work 17 hours a day; sometimes I need some sugar!"

This nondogmatic approach may be one of Allen's most appealing qualities. His essential view is that people do the best they can: if they don't have any better food choices than KFC, well, O.K. But let's work on changing that. If they don't know what to do with okra, Growing Power stands ready to help. And if their great-grandparents were sharecroppers and they have some bad feelings about the farming life, then Allen has something to offer there too: his personal example and workshops geared toward empowering minorities. "African-Americans need more help, and they're often harder to work with because they've been abused and so forth," Allen said. "But I can break through a lot of that very quickly because a lot of people of color are so proud, so happy to see me leading this kind of movement."

If there's no place in the food movement for low- and middle-income people of all races, says Tom Philpott, food editor of Grist.org and co-founder of the North Carolina-based Maverick Farms, "we've got big problems, because the critics will be proven right — that this is a consumption club for people who've traveled to Europe and tasted fine food."

In 1993, Allen, looking to grow indoors during the winter and to sell food closer to the city, bought the Growing Power property, a derelict plant nursery that was in foreclosure. He had no master plan. "I told the city I'd hire kids and teach them about food systems," he said. Before long, community and school groups were asking for his help starting gardens. He rarely said no. But after years of laboring on his own and beginning to feel burned out, he agreed to partner with Heifer International, the sustainable-agriculture charity. "They were looking for youth to do urban ag. When they learned I had kids and that I had land, their eyes lit up." Heifer taught Allen fish and worms, and together they expanded their training programs.

Employing locals to grow food for the hungry on neglected land has an irresistible appeal, but it's not clear yet whether Growing Power's model can work elsewhere. "I know how to make money growing food," Allen asserts. But he's also got between 30 and 50 employees to pay, which makes those foundation grants — and a grant-writer — essential. Growing Power also relies on large numbers of volunteers. All of which perhaps explains why other urban farmers have not yet replicated Growing Power's scale or its unique social achievements.

So no, Growing Power isn't self-sufficient. But neither is industrial agriculture, which relies on price supports and government subsidies. Moreover, industrial farming incurs costs that are paid by society as a whole: the health costs of eating highly processed foods, for example, or water pollution. Nor can Growing Power be compared to other small farms, because it provides so many intangible social benefits to those it reaches. "It's not operated as a farm," said Ian Marvy, executive director of Brooklyn's Added Value farm, which shares many of Growing Power's core values but produces less food. "It has a social, ecological and economic bottom line." That said, Marvy says that anyone can replicate Allen's technical systems — the worm composting and aquaponics — for relatively little money.

Finished with his business in Merton, Allen sang out his truck window to his plastic-picking volunteers, "Don't y'all work too hard now." The future farmers laughed. Allen predicts that because of high unemployment and the recent food scares, 10 million people will plant gardens for the first time this year. But two million of them will eventually drop out, he said, when the potato bugs arrive or the rain doesn't cooperate. Still, he was sanguine. "The experience will introduce those folks to what a tomato really tastes like, so next time they'll buy one at their greenmarket. And when we talk about farm-worker rights, we'll have more advocates for them."

At a red light on Silver Spring Drive, Allen stopped and eyed the construction equipment beached in front of a dealership. "Look at that front-end loader," he said admiringly. "That thing isn't going to sell." He shook his head and added: "Maybe we can work something out with them. We could make some nice compost with that."

Elizabeth Royte is the author of "Bottlemania: Big Business, Local Springs, and the Battle over America's Drinking Water."