



SPOTLIGHT ON...

Growing Power and the Urban Farming Movement

Based on an interview with WILL AND ERIKA ALLEN

Recently, first lady Michelle Obama unveiled a new organic vegetable garden on the South Lawn of the White House, stimulating education about the benefits of healthy, locally grown fruits and vegetables. According to Will Allen, a 2008 winner of a MacArthur “Genius Award” and an urban farmer who has long worked to produce and deliver healthy food to low-income urban populations, this is a tangible indicator of a growing commitment to urban farming.

Why this new focus on urban farming? The simple virtue of the urban farm is that it allows low-income communities to access healthful food. And this, in turn, has the potential to combat long-standing health problems plaguing low-income communities, such as diabetes and obesity. It can also provide an example of grassroots change that motivates community members to take on other urban and low-income problems. Will Allen and his daughter Erika Allen, the Chicago Projects Manager of his Growing Power organization, recently spoke with us about how their organization is changing the urban landscape.

Growing Power is an urban farm and food delivery system that helps low-income Americans by growing and distributing high-quality, safe, healthy, and affordable food. In Milwaukee, Growing Power has a two-acre farm and greenhouse that draws on low-cost farming technologies, including raised beds, aquaculture, vermiculture, and heating greenhouses through composting. The farm is no larger than a small supermarket, but it contains some 20,000 plants and vegetables as well as fish, chickens, goats, ducks, rabbits, and bees. By using its food dis-

tribution networks, Growing Power helps ensure that all low-income residents in the community have safe, affordable, and healthy food within walking distance of their homes.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, over a third of families under the poverty line report being uncertain whether they will have enough food to meet the needs of all family members. Many poor families live in communities where affordable food is available only at fast food franchises and corner stores that hawk beer, cigarettes, and processed foods. As the Allens describe it, the urban landscape is too often a “food desert” in which safe, healthy, and affordable food is just a mirage, with poor nutrition, obesity, and diabetes the predictable result. The objective of Growing Power is not just to deliver healthy food to residents of these neighborhoods. Additionally, it can provide community residents with jobs, many of them green jobs, while empowering neighborhood residents by demonstrating that positive change is within reach. Although Growing Power takes on important problems, the Allens maintain that it still needs to be supplemented with standard emergency food services, such

as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

The Growing Power vision has been implemented in Milwaukee and Chicago, but the Allens note that it can be replicated and reproduced across the country. Because the relevant farming methods are readily taught, Growing Power is providing intensive training to people and organizations interested in establishing similar farming initiatives in other urban settings. Satellite training centers already exist in places such as Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Mississippi. Furthermore, by bringing youth into the organization, Growing Power has invested in a long-term constituency for the urban farming movement. In the Milwaukee Youth Corps program, Growing Power provides opportunities for young people to learn the basics of organic agriculture, develop leadership and entrepreneurial skills, work with a diverse group of people, and gain life skills.

So where does urban farming go from here? According to the

Allens, the answer in many cases is up. In some cities, space is at such a premium that urban farming will have to take a vertical form—so-called “vertical farming.” With improvements in technology, these “vertical farms” could be fully powered off the grid through renewable energy, thereby sidestepping conventional energy sources and delivery.

The Allens are strong advocates of the idea that combating poverty will be easier if we harness the power of urban farming initiatives to improve the health and well-being of low-income Americans. The urban farm can empower low-income communities by helping them design and maintain their own healthy, nutritious, and economically productive food systems. The big challenge of the coming years, they suggest, will be to spread the urban farming concept and to build a much larger complex of urban farms. Although there is a pressing need to build new urban farms now, the Allens are also strong supporters of research to find out which of the various urban farming formulas are most effective.



Left: Growing Power's aquaponics system raising tilapia, yellow perch, watercress, and assorted greens on vertical beds.

Below: Will Allen, founder and CEO of Growing Power.

Bottom: Growing Power's urban farm in winter.

Previous page: Winter greens growing in unheated hoop houses.

