



Will Allen, Urban Farmer

By Elizabeth Royte



Will Allen founded Growing Power, an urban farm cooperative, to make fresh, locally grown food available in low-income urban neighborhoods. © AP Images

Like others in the so-called “good food” movement, Will Allen, 64, asserts that the modern industrial food system is depleting soil, poisoning water, gobbling fossil fuels and filling Americans with bad calories. He advocates eating locally grown food. But to Allen, local is not a rural field or a suburban garden:

it is 14 greenhouses crammed onto two acres [0.8 hectare] in a working-class neighborhood on Milwaukee’s northwest side, not far from the city’s largest public-housing project.

“From the housing project, it’s more than three miles to the super-market,” said Allen. “That’s a long way to go for groceries if you don’t

have a car or can’t carry stuff.” Fast-food joints, liquor stores and convenience stores selling highly processed, high-calorie foods, on the other hand, are abundant. Allen says, “We’ve got to change the system so everyone has safe, equitable access to healthy food.”

Allen’s Growing Power farm provides healthful food to 10,000

city dwellers through an on-farm retail store and farmers markets, and by supplying produce and fish to schools and restaurants. And Growing Power has expanded to other cities, including Detroit, Chicago, Denver and Louisville, Kentucky.

Allen's book, *The Good Food Revolution*, was nominated in 2013 for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Image Award for autobiography/biography. The book documents the long journey he has traveled from his roots. Allen, born in 1949, grew up outside Bethesda, Maryland, with five siblings. His father was a sharecropper in South Carolina. After moving north in the 1930s, "my mother did domestic work, and my father worked as a construction laborer," he said, "but he rented a small plot to farm." Today Allen travels the world, an ambassador for strengthening community food systems. But like his father, he still manages to touch the soil every day.

This essay was published in *Stories of African-American Achievement* (2010) and is based on an article first published by the *New York Times Magazine* on July 5, 2009.



Urban farmer Will Allen surveys one of the community greenhouses in Milwaukee. © AP Images