**Growing Power in an Urban Food Desert**

Will Allen is bringing farming and fresh foods back into city neighborhoods.

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At the northern outskirts of Milwaukee, in a neighborhood of boxy post-WWII homes near the sprawling Park Lawn housing project, stand 14 greenhouses arrayed on two acres of land. This is Growing Power, the only land within the Milwaukee city limits zoned as farmland.

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. Growing Power is in what Allen calls a “food desert,” a part of the city devoid of full-service grocery stores but lined with fast-food joints, liquor stores, and convenience stores selling mostly soda and sweets. Growing Power is an oasis in that desert.

After stints as an executive for Kentucky Fried Chicken and Proctor and Gamble, he returned to his family roots. “I never wanted a career in the corporate world, but I wanted to be able to afford a good education for my kids,” he explains. “At the right time, the kids were in college and the opportunity to buy the farm and start Growing Power came up,” Allen remembers. “From a spiritual standpoint, [it worked out right](http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=412); it was a natural thing, something I wanted to do.”

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.

Allen has taken the knowledge he gained growing up on the farm and supplemented it with the latest in sustainable techniques and his own experimentation.

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.

1. What do you think are some advantages of urban farming? What are some disadvantages?

2) Do you think more urban areas should be encourages to have organic farms? Why or why not?

Notes on Hydroponics:

Notes on aquaponics:

3) Which of these methods do you think would be the most effective in changing our food system to more sustainable practices why?

4) Which do you think would be the least effective? Why?

**Homework:** Find an example of a hydroponic, aquaponic or urban garden in New York City. Research where it’s located, who started it and what they grow.