

Growing Urban Farms

Will Allen, founder and CEO of Growing Power, inspires crowd with possibilities, as well as the facts and challenges for urban farmers.

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By Karri Sandino, Associate Web Editor

Will Allen sits in one of the greenhouses at Growing Power's headquarters in Milwaukee. His recent presentation in Lexington, Ky., was sponsored by the University of Kentucky Gaines Center for the Humanities.

"Will Allen is a big man. And he has a big footprint," said Jim Embry, leader of the Sustainable Communities Network in Lexington, Ky., as he introduced founder and CEO of Growing Power Will Allen, who spoke to a standing-room-only crowd at the downtown Lexington public library recently.

Even more significant than Will Allen's size--the 6' 7" former basketball player has a commanding presence--is the impact he's having as he cultivates urban gardens in communities around the world.

Allen doesn't need physical size to drive home his message of improving nutrition through urban farming--for him, it's all about inspiration and passion.

And for about 90 minutes, Allen inspired with a no-nonsense approach to his mission.

"We don't have a hunger problem in the world," he said. "We have a nutrition problem. We need to do something about it ... you guys have some work to do!"

Allen's work is headquartered at his 2.5-acre Community Food Center Urban Farm, located in one of Milwaukee's densely populated, working-class, retail-centric neighborhoods. There he and his team grow food for their neighbors, shoppers and restaurants and teach others how to do the same--and much more.

According to the Growing Power website: "In a space no larger than a small supermarket live some 20,000 plants and vegetables, thousands of fish, and a livestock inventory of chickens, goats, ducks, rabbits and bees."

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Photo by Growing Power

Showing off a healthy pile of compost getting ready to grow healthy food. The organization has several other farm locations in greater Milwaukee, as well as farms in Chicago; it's in the process of setting up national training centers in Arkansas, Massachusetts and Mississippi.

What Do You Need to Get an Urban Farm Started?

Allen surprised many when he announced the most important thing you need to start a successful urban farm: relationships.

"People aren't just going to run out of their houses and say, 'Yes, let's grow some food,'" he said. "It's about educating neighbors, enlarging their minds and engaging the community."

It's the responsibility of the urban farm organizers to develop relationships with nearby schools, youth, families and

businesses--basically any person or organization in the area that could help support the goals of the urban farm.

"They all need to value what you're doing as much as you do," he said.

He says not to worry about the scope of your project. Start small and think bigger as things get going. Developing an urban farming skill set is not an insignificant accomplishment.

The Second Most Important Thing

Surely the plants and seeds are the next most important thing to starting an urban farm.

But according to Allen, it's actually: compost.

LOTS of compost.

"You need to grow new soil because the soil that's there (in cities) is contaminated," he said.

Allen showed the crowd photos of enormous piles of composting materials that are being turned into soil over time--most piles about the size of a compact car and some as large as a house.

Much of the business of the farm he runs involves Olympic-sized efforts to grow soil through composting on the urban farm in Milwaukee and a 30-acre rural farm in Merton, Wis.

The secret ingredients in Allen's compost: coffee grounds, wood chips, leftover produce from supermarkets and brewery waste (from Milwaukee's nearby breweries).

Because the quantities of materials needed to grow soil are so large, collecting enough compost materials to feed the soil can be difficult--it's important again to develop relationships with area businesses that can provide these vital materials.

Another key component: vermicompost. Vermicomposting is so essential that Allen refers to their worms as "livestock." Growing Power harvests and cares for worms the way a chicken farmer cares for his prized, egg-laying flock.

The worms' job is to grow healthy soil for the plants. Vermicomposting (intensive composting in boxes with worms) allows Growing Power to add a nutrient-rich, organic fertilizer and soil conditioner to its new soil. The vermicompost is so valuable that they also sell it at the Growing Power store and at farmers' markets.

"To fundamentally change the food system, we need 50 million people growing food in this country alone, in their backyard, side yard, wherever. Will that happen overnight? I don't think so. Will it happen in my lifetime? I don't think so. But it will happen because now it's a movement," Allen said.

"All we have to do is open our minds. We can grow food almost anywhere. All we have to do is decide we're going to do it."