

Urban Farm Empowerment

Will Allen, the face of urban farming today, makes his case for local, sustainable foods at Idea Festival.

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UF managing editor Lisa Munniksma and Growing Power founder Will Allen met at the Idea Festival booth for Heine Brothers' Coffee, a locally owned business that provides coffee grounds for Louisville's Breaking New Grounds compost project. Read "Growing Urban Farms" about Will Allen's visit to Lexington, Ky. What gets me out of bed at 5 a.m. on a Saturday? Nothing that doesn't have to do with agriculture, horses or urban farming. So when I found out Will Allen, founder of Growing Power and urban farmer extraordinaire, would be speaking on a Saturday morning at Idea Festival in Louisville, Ky., I knew I'd be there, bright and early.

Allen spoke to the crowd about Growing Power's work to train urban farmers and educate people around the world about sustainable agriculture and nutritious foods.

"It's not a good food movement anymore. It's a revolution," he says. "We all have a responsibility to make sure our neighbors, our friends and especially our young ones are eating nutritious food."

By 2050, Allen says, 80 percent of the world's population will live in cities. "We're losing land as we speak. We're losing farmers as we speak."

Learning to grow food in urban environments is more important than ever for feeding people good food. Allen points out that within one week of being taken from the vine, vegetables lose 50 percent of their nutrients. "That's why local food is so important."

After his session, Allen took a few minutes to talk to me—making him late for a workshop with Breaking New Grounds (Sorry, folks!), an urban- and sustainable-farming training organization in Louisville—about the urban-farming movement. Here's a sampling from our conversation:

LM:What are some of the biggest challenges facing people involved with urban farming?

WA: You can go out and get all the land you want, build up all the infrastructure you want, and that really doesn't mean very much if you haven't done the first thing, and that's to engage the community—to get the community on board—and that sometimes takes a long time. I think that is the key piece. Every community is different; some communities are easier to engage than others.

[Start small.]

I hear people say, "The city is offering me 200 vacant lots."

And I look at them and say, "OK. So, what are you going to do with it?"

And they say, "Oh, we can grow food."

No, you can't. "How many people do you have working?"

"It's just me and somebody else."

"So how are you going to grow on 200 vacant lots?"

It's OK to take one vacant lot and put a demonstration there of what [an urban farm] can look like. Bring people there from parts of the community, and show them that this is what you have done, and they can say, "I want one of those on this vacant lot over here."

To me, that makes sense. It also provides you with a place where you can take politicians, funders and other people to get them on board, because words are just cheap. You can say anything. The reason I show those images [in the

presentations] is because that's the work we do; it's concrete. People can't deny it. ...

I think that's really important—the engagement. If you can't do that piece, you can't move forward. You can spend all the money in the world. I've seen projects where people get \$200,000 for a 100- by 100-foot lot, but a year later, it's all in weeds. What does that mean? You've got to have passionate people; you've got to have more than one person. See, I was one person starting this group (Growing Power), but I always tell people to get more than one person because I wouldn't want anybody to do what I did.

Get yourself some passionate partners. ... You've got to have somebody who's going to hang in there.

LM:In some cities, ordinances are preventing people from keeping bees, chickens or goats. Do you have any advice for working with government bodies?

WA: That demonstration farm that I was talking about, bring the politicians there. They're more likely to make policy change when they see something is an asset to the city. Politicians react to what's going to give them votes. They don't react to the right thing, because the right thing might not get them reelected. But if you're able to garner enough support and you have something that people want to see and you can demonstrate that, they're going to support it. I move policy further along with our demonstration project than I do with just getting in a line to talk to them like I'm a lobbyist.

LM:How can people who are just getting started in urban farming find the resources they need?

WA: Come to workshops. At Breaking New Grounds [in Louisville, Ky.], we'll be doing a series of workshops as a regional training center. They can come to Milwaukee for hands-on training from the ground up. That's how you get started. [Additional Growing Power Regional Outreach Training Centers are listed at www.growingpower.org, and other organizations hold workshops in communities nationwide.]

At those workshops, you meet other people. Many times, people come to a workshop and they meet people in their own region who are doing similar work that they didn't even know about. That's another way for them to get engaged, because you need partnerships to do this work. You can't do it in isolation. ... This is communal stuff.