



Photo courtesy of Growing Power

Will Allen Will Provide Keynote For May 9th Smith Symposium

This year's Smith Nature Symposium will feature the leader of Growing Power, a Milwaukee-based organization that supports local food systems. A 2008 winner of one of the MacArthur Foundation "genius grants," Will Allen is an urban farmer who improves the cultivation, production and delivery of healthy foods to underserved, urban people.

"In America's inner cities, you go to a corner store where all you have is processed foods," says Allen. "It is my belief that everybody, regardless of their economic means, should have access to the same healthy, safe, affordable food."

At Growing Power's community food center on the northwest side of Milwaukee, co-founder Allen and the staff offer trainings in "how to grow food, how to grow soil, and how to grow energy," as Allen puts it. The energy is both literal, in the sense that the Growing Power farm has a manure digester that supplies heat from methane, but also metaphoric. Allen is convinced that growing food creates an energy that transforms individuals and communities: "Food is a powerful organizing tool."

Since 1997, Growing Power has occupied a two-acre urban farm that has over 20,000 plants growing. Goats, sheep, chickens and bees are at home here. An enormous composting operation is underway, including a system that uses worms to break food down into soil more rapidly. The greenhouses utilize an innovative system, where water from fish tanks is circulated to help grow salad greens. Very little water, nutrients, or energy are wasted. The perch and tilapia from the fish tanks provide important local protein sources. Describing a recent visit to Growing Power, Mike Finn, a Chicago food activist, says, "The amount of productivity—composting, food production, animals—that is going on in this urban, residential neighborhood is staggering."

At the heart of it all is Allen. "He exudes this enthusiasm and acceptance of whomever you are," says Finn. "You have the sense that he is really eager to work with you, whatever your skill levels. He's got his hands in the compost, you're doing the same, it feels open, like we're all working toward the same goals."

Growing Power has expanded in recent years to a community garden on Chicago Avenue and an urban farm in Jackson Park in Chicago. Allen is a national spokesperson for the local food movement. None of this comes a minute too soon, as far as activists like Finn are concerned. Finn says, "There should be a Growing Power in every town and city." Allen is the 26th speaker at the Smith Nature Symposium. The Symposium is named for Ellen and Dutch Smith, and was established to bring national figures in conservation to Ryerson Woods to address the citizens of northeastern Illinois.