

# Urban Agriculture as a Social Justice Change Agent and Economic Engine

Growing Power is a national non-profit organisation and land trust that supports people from diverse backgrounds and the environments in which they live. Growing Power provides hands-on training, on-the-ground demonstration, outreach and technical assistance through the development of Community Food Systems that help people grow, process, market and distribute food in a sustainable manner.



Youth Corps at the Chicago Avenue Community Garden

**G**rowing Power was established in 1998 as Farm-City Link, a farmer-operated greenhouse and small farmers' cooperative located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. It was formed to assist small farmers in their efforts to compete for business contracts with wholesale buyers. Soon the property's owner and farmer, Will Allen, began to field requests from the community to install gardens, often with youth involvement at the core of the programmes. Supported by Heifer International, Growing Power established the first youth project consisting of youth training in and production of aquaponics and vermicomposting.

## PROFITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE

Vermicomposting is now at the core of Growing Power's vision and activities to make urban agriculture a viable option in cities. Compost is the key to viable farming. Nutrient-rich waste and organic material are sourced from local restaurants and food wholesalers and are broken down by worms to produce a sustainable fertiliser that outperforms synthetic fertilisers. Growing Power embraces reuse, recycling and reclamation in its economic and ecological model for intensive production.

Allen has combined his knowledge of farming and his understanding of the city as a series of interconnected food and ecological systems to develop an urban food production system. Part of Growing Power's philosophy is that there is always more than one right way to do things, and that a variety of solutions offers community members options. The multi-cultural nature of the organisation and its policy that everyone is welcome and valued lead to innovations and new approaches as additional perspectives and skills are shared.

*"Growing Power inspires communities to build sustainable food systems that are equitable and ecologically sound, creating a just world, one food-secure community at a time".*

Growing Power greenhouses are made of salvaged frames from local nurseries and farms that were unable to compete with large-scale industry. These greenhouses have several levels of plant growth: hanging baskets (for pea shoots, sunflower sprouts, rugula lettuce and Bull's Blood beets), pots partially submerged in water in aquaponic systems, and beds edging along the sides. In one of the greenhouses a swimming pool serves as a water reservoir and home for tilapia fish. They clean the water, which is drawn upward to the top of the structure to flow down through the growing levels.

The hoop greenhouses used by Growing Power are unheated and draped with shade cloth in the summer for cooling. Growing Power has developed so-called "Living Biological Worm Systems" to grow food in the winter months using the "hoop

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plans are being developed for the organisation to purchase the property from Allen in order to build a new premise where it can expand its training, youth development and food processing capacities.

The property in Milwaukee currently includes six greenhouses, three hoop houses, a small retail store, a utility building, a small barn that houses some of the livestock and the beekeeping operation, outdoor pens for livestock, and a large plot of land on which the first stage of the organisation's sophisticated composting operation is located. The centre offers opportunities to a wide array of city stakeholders to learn from and participate in the development and operation of Community Food Systems.

In addition to this urban centre, Growing Power has a rural farm site in Merton, Wisconsin. On this 17 hectare parcel of land Growing Power hosts the Immigrant Farming Project and the Food and Fitness Initiative with the Greater Milwaukee Boys and Girls Club. Two hectares of this rural farm are devoted to intensive vegetable production. The rural site compliments the urban facility. In addition to growing the vegetables sold at the market, it houses a herd of meat goats, raises pasture poultry, cultivates grasses for the variety of animals on site and produces large volumes of compost.

#### ACTIVITIES

Growing Power's projects fall essentially into three areas (consistent with its objectives):

- Training:** On-site workshops and hands-on demonstrations are given in Milwaukee and Chicago.
- Technical assistance:** Training and assistance in project development focus on the development of Community Food Centres and on transforming urban areas into gardens and urban farms. This includes national and international outreach to farmers and communities.
- Food production and distribution:** Food production takes place in the organisation's urban demonstration greenhouses and on the rural farm site. The distribution of produce and value-added products takes place through the Rainbow Farmers' Cooperative and the year-round food security programme: Farm-City Market Basket Program (including Community Supported Agriculture);

Growing Power undertakes community outreach through education programmes that show how the organisation is contributing to the availability of locally grown, fresh, safe and healthy food that exceeds certified organic standards. This food is supplied to Chicago's farmers' markets, Farm-City Market Basket (Growing Power's CSA-style food security programme) and partners in procurement contracts. All of these activities provide important opportunities for individuals and communities to network as they work together to promote food security and environmentally sound food production practices.

A number of factors are currently contributing to the need for training programmes for emerging producers: available land, growing consumer demands for food safety and environmental responsibility, and the increasing interest among the youth in growing food and new employment opportunities.

#### MILWAUKEE

Growing Power serves as a "living museum" or "idea factory" for the young, the elderly, farmers, producers, and other professionals. Over the last ten years, Growing Power has developed a number of projects in Milwaukee.

- **Growing Power Youth Corps:** This is a year-round, youth leadership programme offering both academic and professional experience in Community Food System development and maintenance. Young people from primary school through college work at the Growing Power Community Food Centre during the summer and gain competencies in all active demonstration areas of the facilities.
- **"Urban Farm Girls" Program (launched fall 2005):** A diverse group of young women, ranging from 7th- to 11th-graders, from eight different schools attend weekly meetings and plan, grow, and market their own crops and value-added products.
- **Farm-City Market Basket Program (FCMB):** This is a weekly, year-round, food security programme that supplies safe, healthy, affordable vegetables and fruit to communities at a low cost. The programme effectively increases city residents' access to affordable food, while providing a viable market for small farmers and urban gardeners in which to sell the food they grow.

#### Grant Park Potager

within the hoop" method of hot beds covered with mini hoops to preserve heat that is generated from the composting process. Growing Power's Living Biological Worm System approach is an active learning tool to teach young people and adults the importance of closed loop systems and how to grow food in urban soil and depleted/contaminated spaces.

All of this leads to an important economic reality: this type of year-round production has a yield value of nearly \$200,000 per acre per year! This type of production is labour intensive, but that labour means jobs in urban environments.. It also translates into healthy, sustainable produce for local restaurants, which allows them to spend more money on healthy food and less on shipping produce from California or international sources. Nearly every aspect of the organisation's production, programmes, and products directly benefits the local community. Some of the most under-served populations in the United States are starting to produce their own food. In addition, facilitators across the nation and around the world are being trained to set up similar community food centres in their own communities (most recently in Skopje, Macedonia).

#### URBAN AND RURAL

The Growing Power Community Food Centre is the last remaining farm and greenhouse operation in the City of Milwaukee. It is currently owned by Growing Power Director, Will Allen, but

- **Rainbow Farmers' Cooperative:** Growing Power helped create the Rainbow Farmers' Cooperative, a network of small family farmers who grow and market food using sustainable techniques.

- **Growing Together: Community Food Systems "From the Ground Up":** This is a national, grassroots training programme of neighbourhood-based food and gardening projects.

**A Community Food Centre** provides wonderful spaces for hands-on activities, for large demonstration projects, and for growing a myriad of plants, vegetables, and herbs. A space no larger than a supermarket can hold some 20,000 plants, thousands of fish, and a livestock inventory of chickens, goats, ducks, rabbits, and bees.

Demonstration and training modules include:

- **Large-Scale Food Residue Processing:** Using aerobic and anaerobic digestion methods, food waste is diverted from landfills and made into organic compost, which is then used in local community garden and urban agriculture projects.

- **Vermicomposting and Composting:** These "living" systems are composed of carbon residue, customised microorganisms, minerals, and red wiggler worms. The resulting "material" is remarkably fertile, giving plants access to the nutrients needed for both plant growth and for human nutrition.

- **Aquaponics:** A closed-loop plant and fish growing system that can be utilised in small spaces, with minimal cost and maintenance. Growing Power does not use chemicals or artificial additives in this system.

- **Living Skills:** A training series on food production, processing, marketing and distribution, utilising year-round horticulture, agriculture, composting, vermiculture, and aquaculture techniques.

## CHICAGO

In 2002, Growing Power opened a Chicago office to assist urban agriculture initiatives in the Chicago area. It currently operates three urban agriculture farming projects, delivers to eight Farm-to-City Market Basket drop sites, manages an active stall at the Green City Farmers' Market and delivers local produce to premier restaurants. In addition, Growing Power is involved in food policy issues via the Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council and provides guidance to thirty high school and four college interns and one apprentice. Their projects include the following:

The Grant Park Urban Agriculture Potager (Urban Farm) partnership with the Chicago Park District is proving that the social benefits of urban agriculture reach beyond local food miles and food security and encompass youth economic development and education. This edible garden of 1850 square meters in the midst of Grant Park has over 150 varieties of vegetables, herbs and flowers, and it is used as a hands-on educational site for 10-30 youth interns, sponsored by the City of Chicago's After School Matters programmes

El Conuco Farmers' Market in Chicago's largest Puerto Rican neighbourhood is in its first season. Growing Power is the primary vendor at the market and another youth project, God's Gang, also sells produce at this market. Customers are beginning to ask for produce that is more

specific to Puerto Rican cuisine, such as "Recao", a staple herb. It is a challenge to find new farmers who are willing to produce these vegetables and sell them at a small and developing market.

The Jackson Park Farm Site and Education Center was established in June 2007. Most of the site is dedicated to production for Growing Power and community farming. Supported by Growing Power's Chicago Youth Corps, community members learn gardening basics and apply the Living Biological Worm Systems. The Chicago Youth Corps is a year-round teen development programme. Teens work five days per week for 4.5 hours per day in the summer months to learn both farming skills and "soft" job skills, such as appropriate communication skills for the workplace, conflict resolution, and teamwork. This year during the spring and fall, these teens helped develop a food literacy campaign to inform other teens about local agriculture and healthy food options. They produced a button with the slogan "Turnip the Volume on Vegetables", and painted a mural at the office in Chicago.

## GROWING FOOD AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

This Initiative, hosted by Growing Power, is an new comprehensive network that views dismantling racism as a core principal bringing together social change agents from diverse sectors that are working to bring about new, healthy and sustainable food systems and support and build multicultural leadership in impoverished communities throughout the world.

Coupled with our vision for social and food justice, Growing Power has a vision to share and help others grow food where we all live, thereby decreasing our reliance on petroleum-fuelled industrial farming while maintaining technically complex and flourishing biological production systems that are accessible to all people regardless of economic circumstances or environments. This is the future of agriculture: using natural processes to create highly productive, urban food sources, and introducing healthier alternatives for people and the environments in which the systems are implemented.

### References

USDA. 2004. Household Food Security in the United States.

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