

Green Dreams

Erika Allen would like nothing better than to turn everybody in Chicagoland into a gardener.

By Christopher Weber

Erika Allen thinks differently about gardens. This is her talent, her curse, her modus operandi, her hang-up. It's the thing that makes her different from the average tomato tender, a deep-seated (and deep-seeded) belief in the power of gardens to remake Chicago's working-class neighborhoods into healthier, safer, greener places.

Allen is tall and broad-shouldered, with a full head of tawny curls. As director of Growing Power's Chicago operation, she spends her days making presentations, plying community leaders, and raising funds—all to sow gardens across the city. The organization currently runs five in the city and aims to establish more. Allen connects funders and resources with available land in a kind of dating service for gardeners. A few years ago, she convinced one funder to put an orchard in the courtyard of a South Side high school. And this past November, she won a grant to buy a deluxe pergola for a community garden in Jackson Park. Made of gorgeously rough-hewn beams, it funnels rainwater into a large cistern, from which it will sustain booming rows of chard, carrots, and beans to be sold in farmers' markets.

Last November, under a heavy gray sky that foretold winter, Allen stood with scissors, poised to cut the yellow ribbon across the pergola. Next to her, with his own set of scissors, was her father, Will Allen, who founded Growing Power in 1993 in a defunct Milwaukee nursery. Cameras flashed to record the moment. She has more pergolas to build, more sponsors to woo, more parks to make over.

Then there was her encounter with a big museum and its acres and acres of boring lawn. What better way to enliven it than a new garden? The museum directors must have expected her to propose something tame like grape tomatoes, maybe a weeping cherry. Obviously, they did not understand who they were dealing with.

"They wanted to do a garden out front where they have some boring landscaping," Allen recalls. She suggested that they do a "prehistoric" garden with unusual plants like amaranthus and birdhouse gourd, and other things with huge leaves and flowers and maybe a flesh-eater like Venus flytrap tucked in here and there. Her voice rises with passion, and for a moment I see what she sees, a forest of towering fruits and jagged blossoms, amaranthus and birdhouse gourd, the kind of garden Fred Flintstone would have tended. Then Allen sighs, "They didn't really get it." There would be

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—Erika Allen



Allen and her son Ayo on their West Side front porch. Allen has transformed the yard into a personal farm.

no flesh-eating prehistoric garden, at least for now.

Allen grew up on her father's Wisconsin farm. These days, Will Allen is arguably the face of what environmentalists call the urban agriculture movement. He received a MacArthur "genius" award in 2008. No

less than Bill Clinton has called the elder Allen his "hero."

Somewhat obscured by the kleig lights, Erika Allen directs Growing Power's considerable efforts in Chicago: the five farms, plus an intensive food distribution operation, an internship program for youth, and workshops that teach Growing Power's low-tech, organic approach to growing food.

With Growing Power constantly in the news, Allen is attracting notice in her own right. She recently received a prestigious Post Carbon Fellowship that allows her to rub elbows with leading environmentalists like Bill McKibben and Majora Carter.

"Erika is more upbeat than a lot of environmentalists," says Asher Miller, director of the Post Carbon Institute. "I think that comes from working with her hands and seeing

the kind of empowerment that comes from giving people the means to grow their own food.”

Allen’s vision also springs from her background in the arts. A multimedia artist and art therapist, she sees gardening as nothing less than art therapy writ large, a healing process for the dysfunctions of the city: food deserts, pollution, environmental injustice.

“Because I trained at the School of the Art Institute, I’m really interested in remaking space—for agriculture but also for social justice,” Allen explains. “When you put a garden in, it’s a way of changing a space in terms of how it’s used and how people see it.” >>

Growing Fast: A Growing Power Timeline

Growing Power, Inc. is a national non-profit organization and land trust based in Milwaukee. It operates farms in Wisconsin and Illinois, with an emphasis on serving low-income, urban neighborhoods. It adapts gardening techniques like raised beds, vermiculture, and fish farming for use in the inner city and delivers fresh food to residents through farmers markets, produce distributions, and community gardens. Growing Power also teaches its techniques via trainings, conferences, youth internships, and demonstration gardens.

Chicago Projects:

- Since 2002, Growing Power has collaborated with Chicago’s Fourth Presbyterian Church to facilitate the Chicago Lights Urban Farm near Cabrini-Green.
- In 2005 Growing Power partnered with the Chicago Park District and Moore Landscapes to create an urban farm near Buckingham Fountain in Grant Park.
- In 2007 it established an urban farm and community garden in Jackson Park in collaboration with the Chicago Park District. It’s currently working with the district to establish an urban agriculture park on the South Side.
- In June, Growing Power started Altgeld Gardens Urban Farm, a one-acre farm located at 130th St.
- Growing Power is now working to establish the seven-acre Iron Street Farm in Bridgeport. Located in a former shipping depot, the farm will feature outdoor beds as well as intensive vermiculture and aquaponic operations inside.

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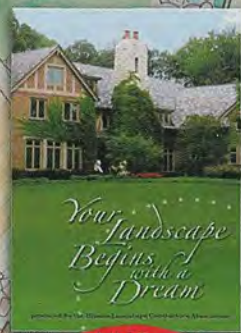
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Erika Allen at Growing Power's Jackson Park farm. Half produces fruit, veggies, herbs and flowers for local farmers' markets, while the other half contains plots for community gardeners.

>> When you listen to Allen reel off one provocative idea after another, you realize that she would cover the Hancock Tower with grape vines if she could. She's already growing vegetables from pavement. Since 2002, Growing Power has teamed with volunteers and residents to transform an unkempt basketball court in Cabrini-Green into 36 raised beds bursting with produce. In fact, the basketball court is still there; faded blacktop peeks from between the beds. When I visited the garden, I was stunned by the size of the turnips and tomatoes rooted in less than a foot of soil—just as I was by the breadth of Allen's proposals. She sat at a picnic table, thinking aloud, unfurling green dreams:

"The police have told me about crack giveaways. When people don't have money, the drug dealers will just give crack away to keep people addicted. I want to do produce giveaways. How great would that be, to come home and find a bag of deliciousness waiting for you: okra, tomatoes, peppers.

"There's all this hype right now about 'edible cities.' People are asking, how many people can you really feed with urban gardens? If every family grew two meals a week, that'd be a huge thing."

"A lot of elders in the neighborhood used to have gardens," she continues. "They understand how it works. What

if we turned their backyards into farms? At harvest, they would get a share and the rest would go to a farmstand."

Allen even detailed a plan to transform her own row house into a West Side kibbutz. "We'd convert the office space to bedrooms and have interns live there. There would be an intensive urban farm, but we'd also have an outdoor classroom, a hoop house, a fire ring so we could do things at night. There'd be things happening all the time. You could come and take classes there. What would that be like, if people were coming to the tough West Side from other neighborhoods to take a composting class? We'd have an artist in residence there, with the goal an open studio. People could come by and make art. There'd be a farmstand. It'd be a big social experiment." Like the prehistoric garden, this plan would ultimately be thwarted.

Despite the occasional setback, Allen has no plans to scale back her ambition to grow social change one garden at a time. In June, Growing Power signed a lease for a seven-acre farm space in Bridgeport. On top of these projects, Growing Power just announced it will start a cultural exchange with small farmers in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

So if African horticulturalists start holding demonstration classes on the West Side, you'll know whom to thank. ☘