

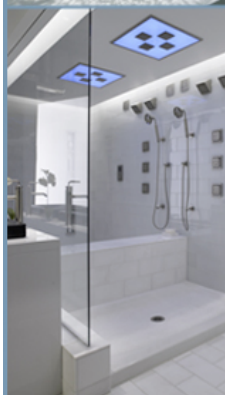


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At Large: Peter Ladner

Cultivating a good-food revolution in your backyard

Will Allen, 60, is a 6-foot-7-inch former professional basketball player and sales executive for Proctor and Gamble and KFC who can't keep his hands out of the dirt.

"I'm a farmer first," he tells his weekend class of 80 people who are crammed into one of his 14 greenhouses in a working-class neighbourhood of Milwaukee. They're paying \$150 per day for a weekend course at the epicentre of the North American urban agriculture explosion. Biceps the size of tree trunks hanging out of his cut-off hoody, he constantly strokes and pokes the moist black soil swarming with red wriggler worms as he repeats his lessons.

"Let's go over it again," he shouts. "What's the proper mix of nitrogen and carbon for healthy compost? They taught me at Proctor and Gamble that you have to hear something five times before you remember it."

Allen is not easily forgettable. His 17-year-old Growing Power Community Food Centre employs 39 people, engages 2,000 volunteers, and cranks out 2,000 trays of sprouts a week.

He figures he's getting \$30 for every square foot of sprouts. He has a 33,000-square-foot warehouse down the road that helps feed low-income people.

The centre's production is boosted by a nearby farm and community gardens in Chicago. Between the low-income food boxes and the sales to local chefs, Growing Power produces enough food for 10,000 people a year.

His success in mixing local food production, low-income job creation and business skills earned him a \$500,000 MacArthur Genius award in 2008 and a \$400,000 grant from the Kellogg Foundation.

In our January class, huddled around warm water in the tilapia fish tanks while the frigid Wisconsin wind chills the composting class outside, an executive from JP Morgan Chase watches over the fruits of his company's \$150,000 donation to Growing Power.

In support of the main driver of what Allen calls the "Good Food Revolution" – getting a reliable source of fresh local affordable fruits and vegetables to ill-fed low-income people – the business angle of urban agriculture is also taking root.

Here in Vancouver, Building Opportunities for Business, the economic development agency in the Downtown Eastside, is anticipating 11 part-time jobs will come out of its conversion of a parking lot at Hastings and Hawke into a commercial community garden.

Developers all over North America – 200 projects at last count – are looking at incorporating organic farms into new housing projects. In crassest terms, organic farming is being touted as "the new golf," attracting buyers with the lure of a neighbourhood fresh-food supply, community involvement in working the farm and the ever-green nature of farmland.

The developer of the East Fraserlands site, Parklane Homes, is sniffing around a proposal for a food hub in Vancouver, the first step to re-establishing the distribution, wholesale and processing infrastructure needed to make urban agriculture feasible.

An attempt to sell rooftop plots at the Fresia condo development on Seymour Street flopped, but it has morphed into a business opportunity for Ward Teulon.

He's a former lawn-care franchiser and agrologist who is refining a business model for making a living wage off farming donated backyard plots. He's now growing a commercial carrot crop on the Fresia roof.

Like most local agriculture ventures, Teulon gets all his cash payments up front. In the U.S., that community supported agriculture model is being fuelled by health-care insurers who pay clients \$200 a year, covering about half the cost of a year's supply of a weekly boxes of fresh vegetables.

For Allen, this can't happen fast enough. "We need 50 million more people growing food. You can't have a sustainable city without sustainable food systems. We can create thousands of jobs doing this."

Allen is coming to Vancouver March 25 for the inaugural Welch Community Dialogue. •

Peter Ladner (pladner@biv.com) is a founder of Business in Vancouver and a former Vancouver city councillor.

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Business in Vancouver (www.biv.com) has been publishing in-depth local business news, analysis and commentary since 1989. The newspaper also produces a weekly ranked list of the biggest companies and players in a wide range of B.C. industries and commercial sectors, monthly features and industry-focused sections that arm its subscribers with a complete package of local business intelligence each week.

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