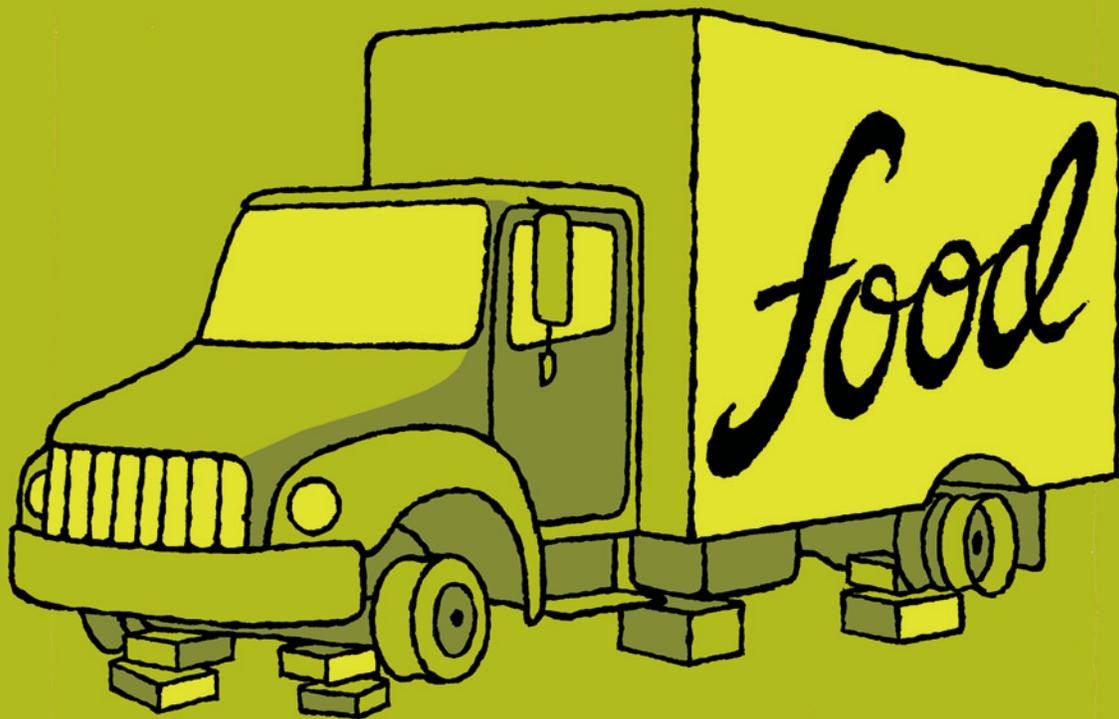


The Post Carbon Reader Series: Food

Growing Community Food Systems

By Erika Allen



About the Author

Erika Allen is Chicago projects manager for Growing Power, a nationally acclaimed nonprofit organization and land trust providing equal access to healthy and affordable food, especially in disadvantaged communities. She is co-chair of the Chicago Food Policy Advisory Council and was appointed in 2008 to the Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Task Force. In 2009 she and her father, Growing Power founder Will Allen, were featured in the *New York Times Magazine*. She has a bachelor of fine arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a master of arts in art therapy from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Allen is a Fellow of Post Carbon Institute.



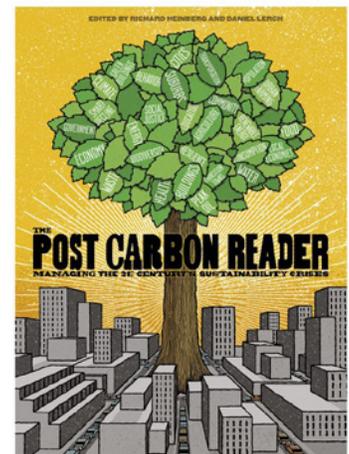
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613 4th Street, Suite 208

Santa Rosa, California 95404 USA



This publication is an excerpted chapter from *The Post Carbon Reader: Managing the 21st Century's Sustainability Crises*, Richard Heinberg and Daniel Lerch, eds. (Healdsburg, CA: Watershed Media, 2010). For other book excerpts, permission to reprint, and purchasing visit <http://www.postcarbonreader.com>.

In a community food system, neighborhood stakeholders are the ones growing and distributing the food.

This chapter is adapted from an interview with Erika Allen by Daniel Lerch on January 24, 2010.

Community Food Systems

The idea of a community food system is much larger than just urban farming. It deals with everything, all the components that are needed to establish, maintain, and perpetually sustain a civilization.

Urban farming is key in the reclamation of an Earth- and ecology-based value system, and it plays an important role: We need urban food production, communities growing food in an urban environment. But with a *community food system*, neighborhood stakeholders are the ones growing that food, moving it around, and in control of land tenure or wherever soil-, food-, and Earth-based materials are being grown. Basically we are talking about sovereignty, about having land and water rights.

This is not a new concept; indigenous communities globally struggle with powerful external entities that attempt to extract raw and refined resources from land that has traditionally been stewarded by families who understand the natural laws of replenishment and proper natural-resource management. In a locally-operated food system we engage all members of the community, taking special care to engage the most marginalized members and those most impacted by food and land degradation. We begin with simple questions:

“Where are you going to get water from, and how are you getting the water?” “Who makes the decision about how land—open space and commercial space—is being used?”

These simple questions activate civic and civil rights and accountability with government, because there are always regulatory issues and agendas that (as is often revealed) community members are unaware of and have not been included in the conversations. So true sustainability in terms of community food systems means that disenfranchised people, especially youth and their families, are involved in the process not only as beneficiaries of “good (and carbon-neutral) food” but as central participants in the planning, development, and execution of the food system, including its interlocking parts: energy, housing, public transportation, economic development, and so on. You’re building a whole infrastructure that supports local food systems.

This is how we differentiate it in our thinking at Growing Power, because we don’t just do urban farming. We work with youth, go to markets, do advocacy work around policy, write grants, give talks—and all those things are connected and part of reestablishing functional communities and food systems. We have a food security program where people pay a basic weekly fee for year-round food security, and in return they get a bag of food with fresh fruits and vegetables both from local wholesalers and from stuff that we produce

ourselves. This is the baseline and it forms the infrastructure for more sophisticated elements of the food system to “grow” into an infrastructure that supports community ownership and control of its own food system. We cannot stress enough that community food systems development and implementation are so much more than just “urban farming,” and it’s important because people don’t typically think of food in that way. They think it’s something that farmers do: “Let’s support the farmers! Oh, they’ve got the farm bill; it’s taken care of.” Or worse, “Let’s go buy 200 million acres and allow machines to grow commodities on it that indirectly may or may not be suitable for direct human consumption!”

It goes beyond community-supported agriculture (CSA), but CSA is important too. People think CSA is cute; well, it’s a little beyond cute—it transforms communities. And it secures the community, because if something happens so that food cannot move from California to the Midwest or to the East Coast, what are people going to do? It’s not going to be so cute anymore. Let’s look at the basic “food-desert” neighborhood—it’s usually a low-income neighborhood or ghetto. I live in a food desert; I chose to live there, but it is also what I could afford at the time I was purchasing my first home. I look around me every day and I think, “What would happen? I am the only one who’s got food growing in my yard.” And I have the privilege to know why it’s important, and the capability to do something about it.

So yes, Growing Power does food—but it’s food *plus*. Yes, I am an urban farmer, but I am also a community food systems planner. Many of us doing the hands-on implementation—farmers in the rural and urban environments—have always planned for the land, for the benefit of their family, community, and Earth. Community food systems provide a much needed reclamation of this tradition at a time in history where we are at a technological tipping point.



In “food deserts,” people lack opportunities for buying affordable, nutritious food.

Community Development

We also work with healing, community reformation, and civic engagement. We work with people to develop, first, a vision of what they want their community to look like. This is not traditionally how community engagement happens; typically the community is the last to know what is being planned on its behalf. This is a backwards process. We advocate first identifying who needs to be involved: Who is not at the table, and needs to be? Who are the stakeholders most impacted? Who is going to operate this system? What are the ways that you can create food security within the city, and also create an opportunity for farmers? How do you connect the rural and the urban? We go through that process and start to form relationships. So it is a community-scale effort, and it dovetails with other efforts to build community resilience.

It is really about getting people in power to understand what’s going on in the community—what is working, and how people are finding ways to survive under extraordinarily challenging conditions both here in the United States and abroad. It’s about recognizing that it’s going to be a long road for transformation and keeping the community connected to the resources and to the

So few people have confidence in this area; so few of us have retained our agricultural legacies and knowledge.

people who are doing the work, the visionary doers. It's about making sure all communities have equal access to culturally appropriate, environmentally responsible, affordable, nutritionally dense food—and to do that you have to address everything: housing, land, education, how you prevent and punish crime. So we are seeing that food systems can be a very powerful tool for resilience. In a revolutionary way, you can completely transform things without people realizing what's happening—they are aware, but it just makes intuitive sense this way. It's also not about just going out and fighting the proverbial “man,” or continuing an academic dialogue about what could happen or should happen; you don't have time for this because you've got a lot to *do*. So instead of having people just being oppositional and trying to get someone else to make the changes, you have people who are assets to their community, who are making the transformation happen themselves (but being oppositional when they need to be).

Transformation

This movement—the “good food/community food systems reclamation movement”—is so transformative because people have to go through a whole process within themselves and in partnership with others, because so few people have confidence in this area; so few of us have retained our agricultural legacies and knowledge. You can have ten Ph.D. degrees, but when

you get a pitchfork in your hands you have to understand the fundamental principles of decomposition—you're dealing with basic concepts of life and death. It's actually really simple earth science; it's simple technology that many try to make overly complicated and end up confusing themselves and others in the process. But if you don't understand the basic principles of nature and don't have some degree of patience, you can't do anything to be truly self-sufficient without exploiting other people or the environment.

This is why farmers are geniuses—they do everything. They predict the weather, and they have to plan; it's a huge undertaking. Even a so-called dirt farmer, a poverty-stricken farmer, has to know so much just to survive. These farmers might not be literate in the Western-world sense, but they know everything and have humility and respect for Earth and her resources. Reclaiming that heritage and connecting people to that “understanding,” whatever that may be for them, are very important.

We have our heritage as a family, Allen-Raiford-Bussler, and I have an unbroken line of agriculture people in my own lineage. I almost didn't carry on the tradition—I'm an artist. But I was always kind of a funky artist. I didn't want to be in galleries—instead I wanted to be a community-based artist. I wanted to do art in communities and work with communities and help others have a voice through art. And that led me all the way back

to food. I became an art therapist because I was doing that kind of work already as a community-based artist. I had kids who could not even do art; they were out of their minds. I was thinking it was a psychiatric issue at the time. Then one day I realized that they didn't have any real food—they weren't eating foods with nutritional content, the food many of us from vegetable-farm backgrounds take for granted. With this epiphany I began to ask, How can I solve that? Well, artists are essentially problem solvers. So you have farming on one hand, which is essentially all about understanding natural systems, and artist problem solvers on the other hand—you put those two together, and all kinds of amazing solutions can happen. And you build on that principle. You bring these groups together, you start a facility where people can see natural systems working, and then they can learn those practical skills: They're learning how to farm and how to take care of themselves and others.

And then we see that the people we think don't know very much are really the ones who do. People come to our weekend-long “from-the-ground-up” workshops and are transformed—they're going to do *something*, even if they're just putting in a compost bin or a backyard garden so their kids have that exposure. That makes a difference. It may not save the world, but it's going to save that microcosm of a family unit. They're going to have a different experience with the land. Maybe that will lead them to supporting a local farmer, or maybe that child will end up going into agricultural science or another meaningful profession.

There's no certainty about the future; things can change, and we can change. I've watched my dad work with some very scary people, some overtly bigoted, KKK-type people. He gets them on his side and they become his biggest fans and bring him farm implements, donate supplies and services; it's amazing. That ability to transform people by your own kindness or by your own ability to be who you are, that's something that you can learn how to do, but you have to be



Growing Power founder Will Allen leads a worm composting workshop.

exposed to it and see it as a possibility. We are growing more of these possibilities.

Scalability

Scalability is dependent on the community; we don't just go in and make something happen with a wave of a wand. We're scaling within our organization. We started off with 2.1 acres for our original facility in Milwaukee; Dad has acquired a couple of other properties, and it's spawning within the city of Milwaukee a bunch of other neighborhood projects, and those will spawn yet other neighborhood projects. The water and waste department has provided a long-term lease for fifty acres for us to be able to compost and build greenhouses. We also received a stimulus funding package for fifty youth—young adults who are going to be building greenhouses in Milwaukee and Chicago—and support for six full-time positions over two years. So by next year we will have a substantial year-round food-production operation underway that's low tech and community operated. In Milwaukee public schools we have a contract with their massive food provider; we're growing a sunflower-sprout snack that the fourth-graders have once a week.

We're not just teaching people how to grow food—we're rebuilding community food systems.

People bring stuff to us—ideas, methods, tools, and technologies—and teach us how to use it, and then we amplify it and we pass along the knowledge to others. Heifer Project brought us worms and got us started with a little vermicompost bin. We've amplified it to where we now have depositories five feet tall, millions of worms—and it's literally a depository from which we extract worms when we start a new project to distribute free of charge to anyone who takes the training.

Knowledge and Resource Exchanges

In addition to everything we're doing with our own infrastructure, a big part of our work is with other communities who are trying to replicate what we have. We've worked with communities in Africa and Eastern Europe—one had a Civil Society grant from the United Nations and in the last phases of it I went to project-plan for three days in Macedonia. It's very practical and grounded, and at the same time we're actually growing food and farming and developing those technologies. We're learning new things, and we're also helping communities do the same thing—and they're helping us because it's a reciprocal relationship. These kinds of knowledge and resource exchanges are natural for people who are connected to the earth.

Rebuilding Disadvantaged Communities

One of the things that we try to do is demystify food systems and what food security truly is, empowering the powerless through sovereignty and an understanding of the importance of engaging *everyone* in the community in a responsible, equitable manner. But it's a challenge; many people are averse to the idea of farming. For people of color, especially, it's a huge taboo. Immigrants—really anyone who has been discriminated against—they don't want to do this work; they want to assimilate and reap the rewards that come from becoming a member of “white” society. There was a time when Jews, the Irish, Italians, and Poles were not considered white by the dominant culture when they immigrated to the United States. This continues today—we want to be professionals; lose our accents, cultures, and food traditions; be on Wall Street; and make cash. Why would you want to be poor? We left wherever we came from to come here for a better life—why would you go back? We were slaves; we were migrant workers; we were landless peoples. Why would we go back to that?

A lot of people look from the outside at what we're doing at Growing Power and see it as a way of empowering disadvantaged people: teaching them how to garden, teaching them job skills, giving that kind of uplift and inspiration through hands-on skill sets.

We do that, but it's also bigger than that. We're not just teaching people how to grow food and how to make soil—we're rebuilding community food systems. We're creating space for a whole confluence of small to mighty things to happen. It's a big puzzle, and there are constantly new pieces being inserted. For example, the energy piece: That wasn't where we started because we just needed to get going, to get good food growing and into the community, but now that piece gets plugged in. The peak-oil, community-resilience piece: We didn't start with microgreens right away, but now we do them because if you have the soil fertility (like a high-fertility vermicompost mix) you can grow sunflower seeds and have sprouts that are ready to harvest in seven to ten days. If there was some catastrophe but you had those materials at your disposal you could have sunflower sprouts growing in seven to ten days, and there's 39 percent protein. Sunflowers have more protein as a green than they do as a seed, and fewer calories.

Neighbors

I do not have a traditional yard; it's all garden—wood-chip-raised “living-biological-worm-system” beds growing greens, okra, tomatoes, legumes, callaloo, culinary and medicinal herbs, and African bowl gourds. My neighbors are down with it, and they know me. Historically, a lot more people used to grow food in my neighborhood. But they're older now and they're retired, or they are people who are completely disconnected from life, on crack and other abusively consumed drugs. As I work in my front yard garden I hear comments that range from “Go, girl!” to “No, no, I'm not going to grow a garden.” I mean, in some ways, it's a privileged kind of thing to grow food; you need time, space, soil fertility, and water. People are trying to survive in my community and they don't see it as essential to survival. But this summer I am going to have a lot more people growing food.

Part of enabling those things to happen is having plants to distribute and having compost available. Another



The Growing Power greenhouse connects growing and composting systems while maximizing space.

piece of it is that there is so much work to be done around regulatory issues. To do compost in Chicago there had to be a regulatory separation made at the state level between trash and food waste just to make it legal to dispose of food waste differently than trash—all waste was considered to be trash. Then we had to get a grant from the Department of Environment to set up a composter, get transfer stations, and get zoning permits. So I have to do all that and then work with the Illinois EPA just so I can legally compost at a scale that provides jobs for people?

The Food Security Movement

My introduction to the community food system movement and the food security movement was at a national conference in Boston. The Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) was founded in southern California by Andy Fisher and others academics, and food security experts. It was groundbreaking work—they basically started the community food security movement nearly fifteen years ago. The founding leaders were able to motivate the USDA to start the Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program. They specifically started talking about addressing food insecurity

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with people of color and disadvantaged communities nationally, and providing resources for those folks to transform their food systems. But for years, very few people of color and people from low-income communities directly received grants, and so the whole movement was predominantly led by white folks coming into communities of color and “fixing the issues.” Even though from the beginning there were people of color like Hank Herrera who confronted these concerns about the lack of diversity and outreach to develop more leaders of color, they were never really addressed as a high priority. It was clear that things had to change.

Then we and others came on board and we began to compete for those grants and we started getting them, and we were able to start asking more questions, like: Why aren’t more people of color getting these? We were able to get technical-assistance grants to be able to train more people of color to be more competitive and get funding from a program designed to fund them. So that’s an example of how Growing Power works, in a larger sense. There are certain things in place to help people transform their communities, but they are not able to get to those resources because they don’t have enough privilege to be able to be competitive. We help communities access those resources.

Monsanto

In 2009 we had an interesting situation with Monsanto/Seminis (Monsanto purchased Seminis, a large, regional fruit-and-vegetable seed company, in 2005). They’d hired a communications firm in Chicago to find an urban agriculture group so they could fund a youth urban agriculture project. They just wanted to give us money, just do an urban farm so that youth could learn about what we do and also be introduced to other forms of agriculture; Monsanto’s name wouldn’t be on it. These people from the communications firm said, “This guy that we know at Monsanto, he’s really nice, and there are some really good people within the company.” And I said, “I am sure there are.” But I and we had to do some deep soul-searching about what we, as leaders, should do with this approach from Seminis—potentially gatekeepers of resources that could mean employment versus incarceration for some of our youth corps members. Do I *not* accept \$200,000 to \$500,000, which would build up infrastructure, provide adult mentors and social-service support, and supply stipends for pay for a few years? Could this be recompense for the global impacts of this company, but also a boon to their public relations efforts to spin their methods “to end hunger and to increase production”? I had to think about it. It’s a real dilemma: What do you do when folks approach you and you’re representing people who

have very limited options and you're being offered all those resources to develop this infrastructure?

We turned it down because of the kind of work we do, the belief in our vision, and to show our solidarity with Via Campesina and the Department of Justice's anti-trust hearings. We advocate seed saving and slow food, and potentially if we accepted the Monsanto/Seminis funds we would have legitimized their work.

On top of that, it would have been so hard for us, as one of the rare organizations led by people of color in this kind of work—work where we're doing something people can see, not just talking a good game. People, our youth most importantly, look to us as role models. You're no better than what you are trying to defeat if you do the same thing and get sucked into that system. Fortunately we have reached a critical point in our development where we do have options.

Inspiration

We have to get people inspired, get them to understand basic principles like why agriculture is important. That's where I diverge somewhat with Wes Jackson, who talks about how the way humans have pursued agriculture has created so many huge ecological problems. I don't think agriculture is a bad idea—I think it's a really good idea; it just has to be managed well, and that is where Wes and I come full circle in understanding the importance of stewardship of the land and preservation of the soil and all of her inhabitants. It has to be managed by people who know what they're doing for a community, not for some abstract wealth-building scenario or commodities or craziness. I don't think agriculture is the end of ecology; I think it's the beginning of people having enough surpluses through balance and exploitive practices, so they can do the arts and they can develop to their full potential.

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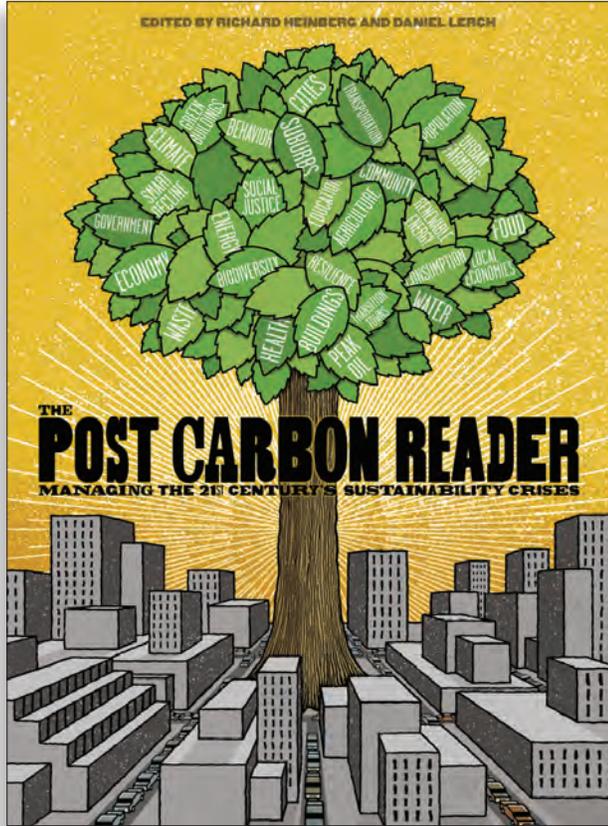
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Acknowledgments

Cover art by Mike King. Design by Sean McGuire. Layout by Clare Rhineland.



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The Post Carbon Reader

Managing the 21st Century's Sustainability Crises

Edited by **RICHARD HEINBERG** and **DANIEL LERCH**

In the 20th century, cheap and abundant energy brought previously unimaginable advances in health, wealth, and technology, and fed an explosion in population and consumption. But this growth came at an incredible cost. Climate change, peak oil, freshwater depletion, species extinction, and a host of economic and social problems now challenge us as never before. *The Post Carbon Reader* features articles by some of the world's most provocative thinkers on the key drivers shaping this new century, from renewable energy and urban agriculture to social justice and systems resilience. This unprecedented collection takes a hard-nosed look at the interconnected threats of our global sustainability quandary—as well as the most promising responses. *The Post Carbon Reader* is a valuable resource for policymakers, college classrooms, and concerned citizens.

Richard Heinberg is Senior Fellow in Residence at Post Carbon Institute and the author of nine books, including *The Party's Over* and *Peak Everything*. **Daniel Lerch** is the author of *Post Carbon Cities*.

Published by Watershed Media

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