

Public will dig Grant Park veggie garden, group says

BY ANDREW HERRMANN
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In the old Green Acres TV show, a big-time New York lawyer flees his penthouse perch, announcing "farm living is the life for me." Declares the counselor: "Keep Manhattan, just give me that countryside."

In Chicago, city folks will have both worlds this summer, as a patch of Grant Park will be transformed into a kind of mini-farm, complete with 12,000 square feet of vegetables.

"Some people may think we're out of our gourd," joked Bob O'Neill, president of the Grant Park Conservatory, which hosted a public meeting Tuesday to unveil the plan.

There will be gourds, for sure — as well as lettuce, radishes, peppers, tomatoes and potatoes. The organic bounty will be planted near a statue of Abraham Lincoln at the northwest corner of Columbus and Congress, said O'Neill.

All natural, no chemicals

The farming will be done by the non-profit "Growing Power" organization, a Milwaukee-based group that teaches urbanites how to use city spaces to grow food. In the case of Grant Park, some 15 strong-spined teenagers will assist in the effort, said Erika Allen, Growing Power's Chicago projects manager.

The no-chemical garden will be planted in specially designed, worm-laden beds, said Allen.

How the harvest will be split is still being negotiated, according to the Park District. Allen would like some to be donated to food pantries and the rest sold at city farmers markets, with Growing Power plowing the proceeds back into other urban growing projects.

The project faces two potential challenges: people snacking on the

crops and rabbits invading the beds. Neither scenario seems to concern Allen too much.

"There are a lot of homeless folks who live downtown and people who are passersby," she acknowledged. "[But] my thing is, I don't mind if somebody comes by and grabs a cherry tomato or snaps off a bean. It'll be organic, so it'll be safe and delicious."

No doubt bunnies will get their dibs, too, but the gardens could be covered at night with a special mesh should the rabbits start gorging, said Allen.

Adam Schwerner, the Park District's director of horticulture, said those who think they'll miss the usual flowers will be surprised by the colors vegetable gardens can produce.