

One man making a big difference

Farmer using his talents to help others in need

by Maryalice Koehne

Will Allen, who farms 100 acres in Oak Creek, didn't just plant one row to feed the hungry. This summer, he set aside two full acres of vegetables for Second Harvest Food Bank of Wisconsin. When the June downpour flooded all his fields, he replanted kale and collard greens to be harvested this fall.

"It feels good to be able to give back to the community," Allen said.

"Gardeners always have extra vegetables, and this is a wonderful program."

Because green leafy vegetables are so fragile, Allen can't rely on volunteers to pick them. He pays his regular staff for the harvest.

When Allen was a boy in rural Maryland, farmers always shared excess produce with friends and neighbors. Today, he is dismayed to see so much produce wasted — baskets of apples set on the curb for garbage pickup and vegetables left to rot in fields.

Now that his three children are grown and through college, Allen's concern extends to other kids who don't



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Will Allen has used his farming skills to benefit many different programs, including the Harvest Food Bank of Wisconsin, for which he planted two acres for

have parents, grandparents or neighbors with gardens. As farmland is covered with new subdivisions, fewer farms exist where kids can pick strawberries or cherries or see

how tomatoes grow.

To combat this trend, he's formed a Farm-City Link. This program teaches inner-city youth various aspects of farming, business management and marketing, by taking them through the entire process, from how to plant their own seed to the sale of products at farmers' markets.

Many children today think apples, carrots, tomatoes and other produce originate in a supermarket, according to a survey last year in South Carolina. "I see kids from the suburbs, as well as from the inner city, who don't know where the food they eat comes from," Allen said. "They're afraid of earthworms and dirt. They've never eaten leaf lettuce."

Allen is a busy man. He hardly needs to take on another project. From 5:30 a.m. to 11 p.m., he is out in the fields, in a greenhouse, at his produce stand or at various farmers' markets.

Besides providing food for the hungry and teaching children, Allen is eyeing vacant lots suitable for gardens.

"It's important for adults to raise vegetables and be food self-sufficient," he said. "That sounds like a project for next year." ✦

When people participate in Plant a Row For the Hungry, they begin to find solutions to many problems. After all, the spirit can be as hungry as the body.