



Urban Renewer

Farmer Robert Pierce takes produce to the people

By Fabu Carter Brisco

Urban farmer Robert Pierce has clear eyes that for decades have carefully watched crops grow, large hands that keep Wisconsin soil under his fingernails and the slight stoop that comes from working long hours in fields. As a local urban farmer, he grows fresh vegetables, fruits and meat products on land near the city. He has been farming for twenty-seven years for himself, his family and the Madison community.

A Vietnam veteran, Pierce developed food allergies when he returned from the service. In 1982, he decided to become an organic farmer and began growing crops naturally according to specific production standards that avoid the use of nonorganic pesticide, insecticides and herbicides. By 1984, Pierce had launched his business, Half the 40 Acres, leasing twenty acres of land to grow more food to sell specifically to low-income and poor people directly in their neighborhoods.

Low income Americans in urban areas spend the largest portion of their food dollars on fast foods, which have the worst nutritional value. Pierce is determined to reverse these statistics by teaching people that fresh food, without pesticides, is best for their families and providing a convenient place for them to find it. Sitting at Robert Pierce's produce stand in the Villager Mall on a recent sunny afternoon, I witnessed people from all ages and ethnicities purchase fruits and vegetables while engaging him on what was tastiest, smacking their lips over samples and thanking him again and again for selling fresh produce in their neighborhood.

Pierce manages five farmers' markets on the south side of Madison, teaches high school students how to grow and sell produce on a kids' farm on Rimrock Road and is partnering with Will Allen, 2008 MacArthur "genius grant" fellow

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and founder and CEO of Growing Power in Milwaukee, to establish a Madison branch. Allen's approach to urban agriculture is drawing international attention. Both Allen and Pierce share a passion to provide healthy fruits and vegetables to people in cities who traditionally have the least access to these kinds of fresh produce.

Their passion will be highlighted during the Wisconsin Book Festival on October 8 at Troy Gardens, 5:30–7:30 p.m.

Food and sustainability also take top billing at the Book Festival with keynote speaker Wendell Berry. Poet, essayist, fiction writer and farmer, Berry is the event's keynote speaker (co-sponsored by the Aldo Leopold Foundation) October 11 at 4 p.m. While all of the events are free to the public, the Wendell Berry presentation requires tickets available at wisconsinbookfestival.com.

Fabu Carter Brisco is a writer, Madison's Poet Laureate and outreach coordinator for the Wisconsin Book Festival.



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*South Madison
Farmers' Markets*

Sunday:

Labor Temple, 2–6 p. m.

Monday:

Novation Campus-Rimrock, 2–6 p. m.

Tuesday:

Labor Temple, 2–6 p. m.

Wednesday:

Southwest (UCC Church), 3–7 p. m.

Thursday:

Village Mall, 2–6 p. m.