Agricultural activist Will Allen is a lifelong farmer, educator and a pioneer of the organic movement who is passionately against pesticides. In addition to teaching agriculture and anthropology at the university level, he has helped implement the California Certified Organic Farmers Organization and founded the non-profit Sustainable Cotton Project. Allen currently serves on the policy and advisory boards of the Organic Consumers Association and is active at home and abroad in food politics. He is also a revolutionary writer who authored *The War on Bugs*, a non-fiction account of the history of pesticides, that was published in 2008 by Chelsea Green Publishing Company.

Will Allen’s home base is Cedar Circle Farm, a 52-acre organic farm in East Thetford, Vermont, offering vegetables, berries and flowers. Will was hired to co-manage Cedar Circle in 2000, when the Azadoutioun Foundation of Cambridge, Massachusetts, purchased the property from the Vermont Land Trust. The Foundation sought to make the farm an exemplary organic operation that would educate farmers, gardeners and consumers about ecologically-sensitive practices in farming.

After coming to Cedar Circle eight years ago, Will started to work on his book, which documents in gritty detail the adverse effects of our country’s chemically-dependent agriculture on our environment and our health. In particular, he charges that chemical pesticides not only deplete natural ecosystems of their biodiversity, but that their use destabilizes rural communities by fostering and perpetuating the industrialization of agriculture.

The book also suggests sustainable alternatives, many of which are employed at Cedar Circle.

As an organic operation, Cedar Circle Farm does not use any commercial pesticides, which routinely contain arsenic, lead and sulfuric acid. The farm uses treatments that are considered acceptable on certified organic farms, and which are substantially less disruptive to the environment and do not pose the health risks that their conventional counterparts do. Specifically, these organic pesticides are naturally occurring bacteria that are not derived from a chemical source.

However, even these sprays are very rarely used at Cedar Circle and only used minimally and as a last resort. They are mainly applied to combat worms in artichokes, potatoes, tomatoes and tomatillos and to discourage the Colorado potato beetle in potatoes.

“There are few justifications for using pesticides, either organic or synthetic,” says Allen. “Usually, we are able to take care of our pests without using any pesticides.” Instead, Cedar Circle extensively makes use of Integrative Pest Management (IPM) practices, which utilize ecological strategies to keep pests under control. One of the most prominent IPM
methods used at the farm is the use of “beneficial insects” -- bugs that help control other bugs that are pests, either by consuming them or their eggs.

According to Allen, Cedar Circle has a large population of these beneficial insects like big-eyed bugs, soldier beetles, tricogramma wasps, lace wings, lady bugs and spiny soldier beetles, all of which were ordered from Green Spot in New Hampshire. They have also since become nativized to the farm.

According to Cat Buxton, the education program coordinator at Cedar Circle, many practices that foster enhanced soil fertility are also applied to pest management on the farm. The farm uses “green manure,” a practice of letting grasses and legumes grow to the point of flowering, and then turning them over to decompose. This disperses the plants’ nutrients, essentially smothering invasive weeds and optimizing the soil’s quality. This natural decomposition serves to boost the “immune system” of the land and allows it to properly protect itself against pervasive insect attacks. Cover crops are used for similar purposes.

“Our main goal is to create a healthy ecology [at the farm] that hosts a diversity of life,” affirms Buxton. “We strive towards balance.

Buxton notes that even though conventional farms regularly applying commercial pesticides may be able to produce amazing yields, this food is grown at a terrible cost to the environment and is basically unhealthy to eat.

That is why Cedar Circle Farm attempts to connect people to local, organic food whenever possible with their 169-member CSA and participation in local Farm-to-School programs, an urban youth outreach program, annual festivals and the four farmers’ markets that they frequent during the growing season, among other initiatives. The farm has invested in renewable energy by purchasing solar panels, using draft horses and growing sunflowers to harvest the oil for fuel.

As for Will Allen, it is obvious he plans to continue as an ardent food advocate. When not working at Cedar Circle, Allen travels around the country to speak against pesticide use in agriculture. In 2008 he spoke at the University of Vermont at the invitation of UVM Extension’s Center for Sustainable Agriculture.

A tried and true activist, Will Allen is not only practicing the alternative, but helping others to learn the way forward.

Laura Kiesel is a graduate student in the M.S. program at the Rubenstein School for the Environment and Natural Resources of the University of Vermont. Her Master’s research focuses on the connection between agriculture and climate. She is also a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in Vermont Woman, Seven Days and E Magazine.