

RON FINLEY

The artist and “gangsta gardener” who instigated a change in the law to make South-Central Los Angeles greener

A natural multitasker with a design background, Ron Finley is a self-defined “gangsta gardener” who wears many hats, from urban gardening advocate to artist and urban anthropologist. His mission: fighting against the unfairness of the current food system by changing people’s mindsets.

Over 23.5 million U.S. citizens live in food deserts—defined as areas lacking access to good-quality, healthy, fresh food—an echo of the systemic racism infused in the country’s food system. Finley often refers to his neighborhood, South-Central Los Angeles, where fast food is ever-present but healthy, fresh produce is rare, as a food prison. “You can grow things in a desert—it’s alive. If you look at a prison, that’s a whole other kind of situation,” he says. “That’s basically what we have here—some people call it food apartheid or food slavery. It’s criminal. It should be against the law.”

Since he couldn’t buy healthy food nearby, Finley decided over a decade ago to grow it himself, sparking a global movement in the process. Initially, he converted an unused strip of soil between the street and the pavement next to his home into an

edible garden full of life. Breaking city guidelines—the garden didn’t meet planning regulations—entangled him in a legal battle with City Hall, warrant of arrest included. But the fight paid off; the law was amended and thanks to his efforts, other Angelinos can legally follow his example.

“What we have here, some people call it food apartheid or food slavery. It’s criminal. It should be against the law.”

Finley’s 2013 TED talk on guerrilla gardening was watched by millions and led to public speaking opportunities around the world. His gardening MasterClass, released in 2020, has become a global sensation and the first MasterClass to be streamed in prison systems in California and New York. “No idea how many gardens have been inspired by me around the world—by the emails I get, probably thousands,” he says. “From Greece to Hawaii to Compton to Virginia, I know it’s happening. I call myself an urban anthropologist; I am showing people how they could change their lives. We are nature, we decompose like a leaf does, we need to be taken care of, just like plants do.”

