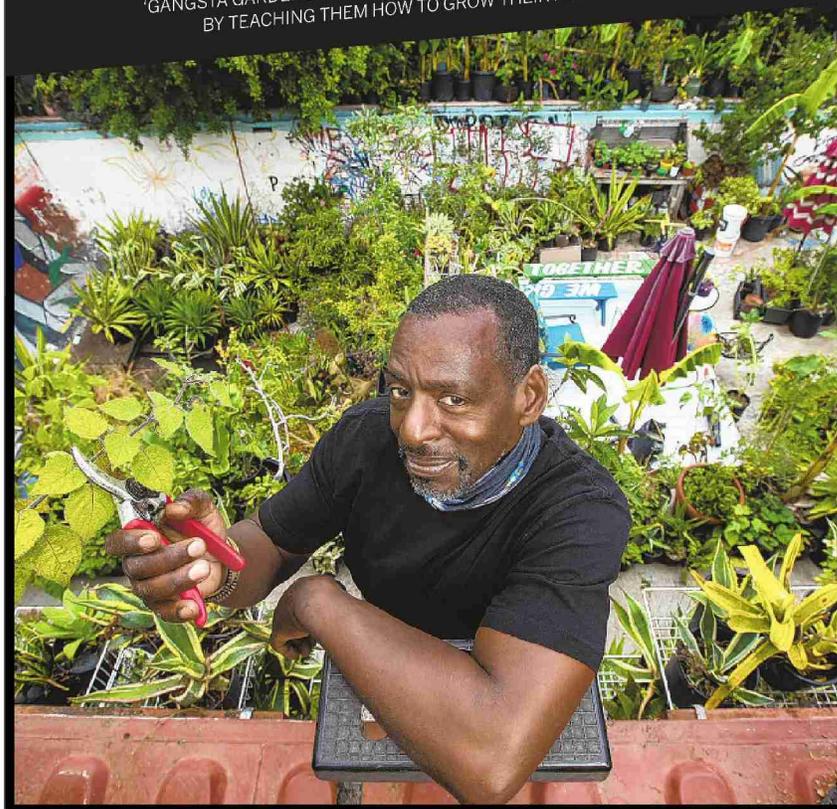


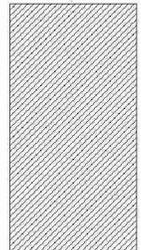
SEEDS OF CHANGE

'GANGSTA GARDENER' RON FINLEY WANTS TO GIVE PEOPLE POWER
BY TEACHING THEM HOW TO GROW THEIR FOOD. F4-5



Photographs by Matt Moczor, Los Angeles Times

SATURDAY



RON FINLEY, below, is credited by Sam Robertson, *Indivision*.



HIS 'ECO-LUTIONARY' CALL TO ACTION



'GANGSTA GARDENER' RON FINLEY BEGAN WITH ACTIVIST PLANTING AT HIS L.A. HOME. NOW HE'S TEACHING PEOPLE TO GROW FOOD IN A MASTERCLASS

BY JEANETTE MARANTOS

RON FINLEY — the self-proclaimed Gangsta Gardener — carries his persona like a shield. He's this tall dude with hemp Patagonia

pants and a slightly silver goatee who seems pretty laid-back until you're close enough to read the keep-your-distance tension in his eyes.

Finley is a doer, a constantly moving, make-things-happen

kind of guy, but this spring and summer he's spent a *lot* of time answering questions from journalists and fans. He's been famous for years, but his new online MasterClass in gardening hit the streets in April, when

a national craze for gardening and then outrage over police violence and systemic racism brought a whole new audience to the pulpit where Finley has been preaching for a decade. His message? Empowerment through

growing our own food.

Like everyone else, I wanted to get his take about current events and, of course, gardening. But right now, Finley is standing under a small cluster of banana trees outside his West Adams home with a steak knife in his hand — one of his favorite garden tools — and he's talking in passionate scattershot, changing topics every minute or so while he trims some papyrus stalks overgrowing in the parkway outside his house.

Wait ... *papyrus*?

Yes, papyrus, he says, as in the stuff the ancients used to make scrolls. He wants to try that himself when he has the time, but right now he just admires the beauty of these plants, and the way they grow so tall and in such profusion amid a towering pomegranate tree, artichokes, rosemary and corn.

"Beauty in, beauty out," he says.

Then he's casually pointing out the huge bunch of green bananas dangling just above the sidewalk in this thicket of green and saying, "Did you know that a banana tree only produces one bunch of bananas in its lifetime?" which is why his assistant, Sam Robertson, is busy pulling out several older trees so the young ones can have their chance to fruit.

And in the next breath Finley is reaching down and digging into the loose, loamy soil of the parkway — yeah, that usually weedy, hard-pan strip between the street and the sidewalk — to show how it's teeming with earth worms and all the composted amendments that make plants thrive. He's running his fingers through this super soil the way pirates

fondle their treasure, and he's talking about growing a "food forest" in the city and how he wants to make all this "sexy" and "gangsta" — growing food, creating urban forests, building beautiful soil ...

Gangsta soil?

"Yeah, soil. Soil is gangsta, but you can't get more gangsta than air," Finley says. "People take the whole gangsta mentality as something negative, but it's not. Nobody thinks about air, but just try to do without it. It's something you can't do without, and *you can't even see it*. It's gangsta, it's ninja. Air is gangsta as f—."

That last sentence is right out of the introduction to his new MasterClass in gardening, which is peppered with such salty wisdom. (It's also the way Finley talks, nonstop, which makes him challenging to quote in a family newspaper.)

In fact, says David Schriber, chief marketing officer for MasterClass, the "air is gangsta" quote is still famous around the offices of the pay-to-learn online classes that feature top names in multiple fields, such as drag icon RuPaul, Disney chief Bob Iger, and powerhouse producer-writers Shonda Rimes and Aaron Sorkin.

The classes were filmed in Finley's backyard last fall, but didn't go live until Earth Day, April 22, so that people in cooler climates than California's could actually get outside and do some planting, Schriber said. At least that was the original thinking, but the timing was also serendipitous, when people were sheltering at home during the pandemic and interest in growing food had spiked. Schriber said

he can't reveal numbers, but Finley's classes have been "one of the most popular."

Of course, no one at MasterClass knew about coronavirus last fall or the eruption of anger after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Schriber said. They just knew their target audience of 30-somethings had a growing interest in healthful eating and the origins of their food. Schriber said another one of their instructors, famed chef Alice Waters, was asked for suggestions for someone to teach a class about growing food, "and Alice immediately said, 'You need to talk to Ron.'"

Making gardening "gangsta" has been Finley's mission since 2010, when he began planting food on the weedy parkway outside his home and got into trouble for violating Los Angeles city code. He fought the city and won permission to keep his garden and build more like it in the "food deserts" around South L.A., where, he says, it's far easier to find liquor stores, fast food and diabetes treatment centers than organic fruits and vegetables.

Then there was his famous TED talk in 2013 that's had nearly 4 million views and been translated into 34 languages, and a documentary, "Can You Dig This?," highlighting his goals in 2015, and then the fight to save his rented West Adams home and garden after it was bought at auction by a development company who tried to evict him. He won that battle too, thanks to donations from more than 60,000 people, including many prominent organic food companies, and the Ron Finley Project was able to pur-

chase the property and continue spreading the gospel that "you can have independence and a better life by growing your own food."

Except Finley, who's traveled the world to talk about gangsta gardening, isn't your average speaker. His language is unapologetically profane, and he hasn't toned it down much for his MasterClasses. After the first shock, his approach feels strangely refreshing, a no-BS approach to learning that mixes gardening tips with life lessons, and MasterClass took full advantage. They got a huge billboard in West Hollywood, visible from both directions on Sunset Boulevard, to promote their newest instructor. And there, looming above traffic, was Finley holding a shovel and a green leafy plant, staring out at the world with the following invitation: "Y'all want to plant some motherf— kale?"

"Ron teaches us to appreciate all sorts of things in life," Schriber said. "He immediately gets you to rethink everything from soil to air to how to create a garden in an old dresser drawer ... and if he swears a few times along the way, we're grownups. We can handle it."

Finley appreciates that his message is being heard, but he's impatient too because there's so much to do. See, Finley isn't just about gardening; he's about changing the world and the way we see ourselves. He wants us to stop taking nature for granted, and stop throwing things away that can be reused someplace else. He wants to transform schools so that they teach students how to plant food, and elimi-

nate people's dependence on corporations for food. And he wants to flip "the gangster mentality, the violence, the misogynistic behavior, the 'be high, be drunk' ... because if you're intoxicated, if you're high, that means you're not woke, you're not current, you're not clear," he says in his MasterClass introduction.

"I think everybody should have knowledge of how to feed themselves and what food they're eating. I want people to know, you *do* have power, you *do* have a say so, and your life *does* matter, but first of all it's got to matter to *you*. That's what this is about; this is to show people that there's a big part of your life you can design yourself and not live the life that's been designed for you."

FINLEY himself took a gardening class through the UC Cooperative Extension, but says most of what he's learned has been self-taught, through trial and error.

"I'm more of a write-the-book than read-the-book type person," he said. Like when he first tried to make compost in a bucket with a lid and the contents rotted into a putrid slop "because you need air to decompose," he said. "It was horrible, but to me, there are no failures; only lessons."

And hard work. Finley has high expectations for himself, and is impatient with people "who aren't willing to put in the work. If you're going to do it, put your ass on it and make it shine.... My work should inspire you to go above

what I just did, not copy. We're all here to inspire each other."

Hearing this, it's hard not to look at Robertson, Finley's assistant, and wonder what it's like to work for this man. "It's good," said Robertson, a young, soft-spoken filmmaker who started gardening for Finley this spring when film work dried up during the pandemic and he needed to pay his student loans.

Robertson's a newbie to plants, but he says Finley's lessons are as much about life as they are about gardening: When Robertson mistakenly pulled out some vegetable seedlings because he thought they were weeds, his boss didn't get mad, Robertson said. Finley just replanted the seedlings and told him not to judge things when they're new or young. "He said, 'Don't be so quick to cut out something when you don't have all the facts yet. Be patient and wait for it to grow,' and I realized that works for people too. He helped me see I shouldn't quit on things, or people. I should stay aware and give them time."

So in addition to gardening, Finley is really part motivational speaker, and part revolutionary, or what he calls an "eco-lutionary — someone who gives a f— about this planet and is fighting for it." He preaches about a world where neighbors grow food to share with each other, and vacant lots are lush with edible plants for the community to share.

But he also wants to undo the taint of slavery and grueling farm work that he believes has soured Black people and Latinos from working in the soil because they

equate it with oppression and degradation.

"We've got to change that image," he said. "With the pandemic, our values have shifted immensely. You can't eat ... diamonds. I tell kids, 'Nothing you buy gives *you* value. You have an intrinsic value just by being here. There's nothing more special than you are.' That's why we've got to make [gardening] sexy, as sexy as cigarettes, weed, alcohol and McDonald's. If kids plant kale, they're going to eat it, because they've got skin in the game. And if you plant a peach tree, you'll get peaches every single season. We've got to realize the soil is where the gold is. We have to change man's greed to seed."

And in the next breath, Finley corrects any notion that his mission — what he calls the Ron Finley Project — is focused on the poor. He's had some disagreements about this in the past, when a group he worked with wanted to focus its attention on volunteerism and building gardens for the poor.

Finley's core message is that people *everywhere* should grow their own food, even in Beverly Hills. "This is for humanity," he said. "I'm not going around handing out free garden kits. Free is not sustainable. You don't see Disney giving its content for free, and it doesn't work that way for me either. I'm not Mother Teresa."

Of course, he says gruffly, if someone is hungry and in need, he'll assist them in creating a garden, "but don't expect me to do it for you. I'll help you, but I'm not 'the help.'"

ALTHOUGH Finley can be passionate and intense talking about his message, he also has a playful side. At one point, he begins singing all the lyrics to the "Super Chicken" cartoon as he drags a hose for a photo, and as he wanders through his garden, he offers his guests gifts of nectarines and little sprouts of plants.

Deep down, he says, he's really a shy person, and all this recent attention — on the billboard, the Guardian newspaper, People magazine and helping Al Roker of the "Today" show build a raised bed garden (remotely) — is hard to handle. "It ain't for the faint of heart, trust me."

He's more careful these days, he said, because his ideas and identity have been stolen and strangers will suddenly appear at his door, at all hours of the day or night.

But before his questioner can react, his shields are up again: "Am I shy? Yes, but [I] have to bury it... You don't let shyness keep you from doing what you want to do."

Finley, who declines to share his age, said he grew up in the Harvard Park area of South Los Angeles, the middle child in a large family. His early gardening memories revolve around mowing lawns and pulling weeds, but he does remember loving snapdragons he planted with his mom.

School was a struggle. Finley had too much energy and too little understanding until late in high school, when he said he was diagnosed with dyslexia and finally learned to read.

But while he never excelled at school or attended traditional college, he was a pro at breaking down barriers that kept him from his goals.

In middle school, for instance, he loved the aroma of the cakes and pies coming from the home economics room. He went to his counselor and said he wanted in the class. His counselor said boys couldn't be in home ec, "and I don't know where this came from, but I said, 'Well, all the chefs are men. How do they learn?' And my counselor said, 'You know, you're right,' and they changed it so boys could enroll, all because I wanted to get myself some chocolate chip cookies."

As a young teen, he was frustrated because he couldn't find trousers that fit his body. "I was a skinny child with big thighs and a big butt," he said. "I wanted to have the kind of clothes you see in the movies, but nothing fit right." So he took \$15 he'd saved from mowing lawns and other chores, and went to a tailor. Those pants fit great, but he couldn't afford to buy more, so at 15, he pulled out the family sewing machine and learned how to make his own.

By the time he was 16, he said he was making clothes for family and friends; when he was 17,

he said he got a scholarship to enroll in the Los Angeles Trade Technical College fashion design program. He bought his first power sewing machine, and in 1984, created DropDead Collecxions, tailored clothes in natural fabrics for men and women that he said were sold in high-end stores such as Nordstrom, Saks and Neiman Marcus. By 1998 he had completed a 12-week entrepreneurial training class at USC to grow his business, but when the recession came a decade later, in 2008, his sales dried up and he went looking for another passion.

Finley's a little vague about why that focus became gardening. He says he got tired of driving 45 minutes to buy an organic tomato. Then he was horrified when he went to a store and noticed the label on a tomato said "it may be covered with shellac for freshness."

But his clearest answer is in his Master-Class, when he says he started gardening "because it was just so personal. I'd get up at 5 in the morning and I'd be in the parkway planting sunflowers and arugula in my pajamas and robe and all of a sudden it's 11 and you haven't showered, you haven't eaten ... literally the garden seduces you."

His backyard was mostly pavement around a 25-by-50-foot swimming

pool he couldn't afford to fill, so Finley brought in artists to paint positive graffiti on the walls, added a small deck and then filled the pool with plants instead of water, in every kind of container. His backyard is a testament to recycling: fruit trees, vegetables, showy lilies and succulents are growing in raised beds, old teapots and even well-worn running shoes.

A few years ago Finley purchased an old shipping container — 40 feet long by 8 feet wide and 8 feet tall — and paid \$500 for a crane to set it in his backyard alongside the pool. He thought about buying other containers to set up cafes around South Los Angeles selling wholesome, organic food, but this container holds many of his recycled treasures, waiting to be repurposed. He's placed a ladder against the side so he can climb up to the top and care for his rooftop edible garden — a joyous mishmash of eggplants and sugar cane, and tomatoes and herbs overflowing from pots and raised beds.

He waves off a question about whether he's taken on too many challenges.

"I've got big-ass hands," he snaps, and then suddenly he's plunging into a new subject, the one that's been consuming the news for weeks.

"My biggest challenge is being a Black man

walking out the door *every single day*," he said. "It's all micro s—, being in an elevator and watching people clutch their purses, standing on the corner to cross at the light and seeing people lock their doors.... Having to be 10 times better than all the other people you're going up against in a job. Whenever I go to a conference, I'm *the* Black guy, the rep for all the people of color, and I'm getting real sick of *that* s—. Just imagine how it wears."

But he hasn't been out marching. "This is my protest," he says, gesturing around his garden, "and every day I wake up is my moment. I'm successful because I woke up this morning. I feel good. No bullet holes, so I'm good. Don't let somebody else decide what's success for you. Everything you do should make you happy."

‘Soil is gangsta, but you can’t get more gangsta than air.’