# Unearthed exhibition reveals gardening as a radical force in Britain’s social history



# Unearthed: Examining the Radical History of Gardening in Britain

"Being able to grow your own food is one of the most radical ways that you can express your freedom, your sovereignty, your liberation,” remarks Valerie Goode, founder and chief executive of the Coco Collective, a Black-led community gardening organisation in south London. Her words resonate deeply as the historical context of gardening in Britain is unveiled in a thought-provoking new exhibition at the British Library titled "Unearthed: The Power of Gardening."

The Coco Collective was established just four years ago, nurturing a 1,200-square-metre plot of previously neglected land in Lewisham. Although open to all, its mission prominently focuses on the African diaspora, linking community members to their ancestral ties and fostering a space for healing. “When we reclaim our food, we reclaim our power," Goode asserts, emphasizing the intrinsic connection between food production and personal identity.

The exhibition aims to shift perceptions of gardening, which many might consider merely a relaxing pastime, revealing instead its complex socio-political tapestry woven throughout British history. As Maddy Smith, curator of printed heritage collections at the library, points out, “Gardening is much more than the nation’s favourite pastime, and we think that it has quite a fascinating and surprising history.” The exhibition seeks to highlight stories and items reflecting the diverse contributions of communities across time.

Among the artifacts on display are an 11th-century illuminated herbal guide, an invaluable remnant from Anglo-Saxon England, and Richard Gardiner’s “Profitable Instructions of Kitchin Gardens,” a practical manual designed to help local farmers cultivate crops following catastrophic harvests in the 1590s. Historical context enriches the narrative: common land, once communal property, gradually fell into private ownership through enclosures, sparking social unrest. For instance, a 1791 map from Bow Brickhill reveals the division of land among gentlemen and the marginalisation of poorer community members, highlighting the ongoing struggle for equitable land access.

This fight for the right to cultivate has not diminished over the centuries. The exhibition includes accounts of early movements like the Diggers and Levellers, who advocated for land reforms in the 17th century, and the 1906 event in Levenshulme, where local gardeners protested by claiming unfenced church land for cultivation. The extent to which gardening has served as a vehicle for social change is profoundly illustrated throughout these narratives.

Contrary to the serene images often conjured by gardens, the historical account shows them as arenas of contestation and colonial aspiration. The 19th-century obsession with orchids, which devastated ecosystems, serves as a stark reminder of the environmental impact of human desires. Furthermore, the Royal Navy’s actions in New Zealand — kidnapping Māori chiefs to learn about the cultivation of flax, which was perceived as "women's work" — underscores the intertwined legacies of gardening, colonisation, and the disruption of indigenous practices.

The exhibition culminates in a contemporary critique of gardening aesthetics. A striking juxtaposition of Capability Brown's classical designs at Blenheim Palace with modern interpretations challenges the legacy of ornamental lawns, now viewed as symbols of elitism and control. This thematic shift is captured in a modern poster proclaiming, “Hoes over mows,” signalling a reclamation of gardening as an act of resistance rather than mere decoration.

Through initiatives aimed at fostering community and addressing critical issues such as food insecurity, organisations like the Coco Collective epitomise the enduring spirit of gardening as a radical act. The emphasis on culturally significant foods and healing herbs empowers individuals, providing both sustenance and a reconnection with heritage. The future of gardening in Britain is being shaped by those who, in the words of Goode, “honour Mother Earth” and seek to build a more inclusive narrative for the next generations.

The exhibition at the British Library is an invitation to reflect on gardening not just as a leisurely pursuit, but as a powerful conduit for social change, cultural identity, and the ongoing struggle for communal rights. In a world increasingly disconnected from the land, it inspires us to consider how we might reclaim our relationship with nature.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[5]](https://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk/2023/04/connect-learn-heal-grow-reap-the-benefits-of-community-gardens/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[3]](https://www.capitalgrowth.org/coco-collective/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[4]](https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/org/public-profile/75076)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[6]](https://www.diggingtheearth.org.uk/2024/10/08/celebrating-black-british-gardeners-and-growers-black-history-month-2024/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[7]](https://events.bl.uk/exhibitions/unearthed-the-power-of-gardening)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[6]](https://www.diggingtheearth.org.uk/2024/10/08/celebrating-black-british-gardeners-and-growers-black-history-month-2024/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum> - An article from The Guardian discussing the 'Unearthed: The Power of Gardening' exhibition at the British Library, which explores the radical history of gardening in Britain. The exhibition features artifacts from the 11th century and highlights the work of modern-day community groups like the Coco Collective, a Black-led gardening organization in south London. The exhibition aims to showcase how gardening has been a form of social and political expression throughout British history.
3. <https://www.capitalgrowth.org/coco-collective/> - A profile of the Coco Collective, an Afro-diaspora led community garden in Lewisham, London. The garden focuses on growing culturally diverse foods and healing herbs, and has introduced a social prescribing program to address food insecurity and mental health issues in the community. The profile includes perspectives from the founder, staff, and volunteers, highlighting the garden's impact on the local community.
4. <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/org/public-profile/75076> - A profile of the Coco Collective's Ital Community Gardens, an Afro-diaspora led community garden in Lewisham, London. The garden focuses on growing culturally diverse foods and healing herbs, and has introduced a social prescribing program to address food insecurity and mental health issues in the community. The profile includes contact information and details about the garden's facilities and opening hours.
5. <https://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk/2023/04/connect-learn-heal-grow-reap-the-benefits-of-community-gardens/> - An article discussing the benefits of community gardens, with a focus on the Coco Collective in Lewisham, London. The article highlights how the garden provides a safe space for people of African heritage to connect, learn, heal, and grow. It also discusses the garden's mental health workshops and its role in addressing food insecurity in the community.
6. <https://www.diggingtheearth.org.uk/2024/10/08/celebrating-black-british-gardeners-and-growers-black-history-month-2024/> - An article celebrating Black British gardeners and growers in honor of Black History Month 2024. The article discusses the contributions of Black British gardeners to the UK's gardening scene, including the introduction of African and Caribbean crops and the establishment of Black-led community gardens. It also highlights the cultural significance of gardening within the Black British community.
7. <https://events.bl.uk/exhibitions/unearthed-the-power-of-gardening> - A page detailing the 'Unearthed: The Power of Gardening' exhibition at the British Library. The exhibition explores the role of gardening in health, wellbeing, and social change, featuring artifacts from the 11th century to modern times. Highlights include the first English gardening manual, Charles Darwin’s vasculum, and the only surviving illustrated Old English herbal.