# Unearthed exhibition reveals gardening as a tool for social justice and empowerment in Britain



# Unearthed: The Radical History of Gardening in Britain

Gardening, often casually considered a leisure activity, has unexpectedly profound roots entwined with social justice, identity, and community healing. Valerie Goode, the founder of the Coco Collective in south London, poignantly remarks, “Being able to grow your own food is one of the most radical ways that you can express your freedom, your sovereignty, your liberation.” Her statement suggests that reclaiming control over food production offers not just nourishment but also empowerment against systemic inequalities. The Coco Collective itself embodies this ethos, transforming a 1,200-square-metre plot of wasteland in Lewisham into a vibrant community space centred around the African diaspora, aiming to heal and educate through direct engagement with the earth.

The intersection of gardening and social activism is further examined in the 'Unearthed: The Power of Gardening' exhibition at the British Library, which runs from May 2 to August 10, 2025. This exhibition showcases not only the practical aspects of gardening but also its historical significance as a vehicle for political expression and communal identity. The narrative of gardening in Britain has been far from straightforward; it has served as a battleground over land rights, access to resources, and cultural heritage. The exhibition curators aim to highlight these complexities. Maddy Smith, the library's curator, reflects, “Gardening is much more than the nation’s favourite pastime; it has quite a fascinating and surprising history.”

The exhibition features a rich array of artifacts, including the only surviving illuminated guide to herbal remedies from Anglo-Saxon England and the earliest gardening manual written in English from 1558. These collections not only illustrate the technical aspects of gardening but also provide a lens through which to view societal changes and challenges over the centuries. Historical items, such as documents from the Diggers and Levellers—17th-century movements advocating for land reform—underscore the long history of contesting land ownership in Britain.

Moreover, the exhibition engages contemporary artists such as Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, whose installation reimagines our relationship with gardens, prompting visitors to consider their environmental and communal roles. The inclusion of films from the Coco Collective adds another layer, showcasing the personal and transformative stories of those involved in gardening today. One participant succinctly stated, "We’ve been growing longer than we’ve been writing books," encapsulating the deep, ancient relationship humans have had with the soil.

Gardening's radicality is further evidenced by its history intertwined with social movements. For instance, the Levenshulme land grabbers of 1906, who cultivated church land for the unemployed, illustrate how gardening has often been a form of protest. Similarly, the exhibition reveals that British gardens have a legacy of being both functional spaces for sustenance and arenas for political expression, challenging our perceptions of what gardens represent.

The curators of the exhibition have deliberately chosen to focus on the stories of diverse populations, aiming to reflect a spectrum of experiences related to gardening. This focus acknowledges that while gardening has often been the domain of the privileged, it has also served as a vital resource for those on the fringes of society. The display highlights the critical role of common land, historically shared by communities, which has frequently been subjected to privatization and enclosure—leading to social unrest across generations.

As visitors walk through the exhibition, they will encounter not just beautiful illustrations and historical texts but also modern commentaries, including Sam Wallman's playful critique of expansive lawns as symbols of control and dominance. Such installations provoke thought about our present-day relationships with cultivated spaces and prompt discussions about ownership, responsibility, and sustainability.

Ultimately, the 'Unearthed' exhibition offers a poignant exploration of gardening as a transformative practice, bridging the gaps between health, community, and environmental stewardship. In a world increasingly aware of the complexities surrounding food production and land use, it serves as a reminder that gardening is not merely a hobby; it is an essential aspect of our collective identity, history, and future pathways towards liberation and empowerment.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[4]](https://www.capitalgrowth.org/coco-collective/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[3]](https://events.bl.uk/exhibitions/unearthed-the-power-of-gardening), [[5]](https://www.artfund.org/explore/exhibitions/2025/05/02/gardening)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[6]](https://www.gardenerscompany.org.uk/news/british-library-gardening-exhibition/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[5]](https://www.artfund.org/explore/exhibitions/2025/05/02/gardening)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[6]](https://www.gardenerscompany.org.uk/news/british-library-gardening-exhibition/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/may/07/exhibition-radical-history-of-gardening-in-britain-unearthed-british-museum), [[4]](https://www.capitalgrowth.org/coco-collective/), [[5]](https://www.artfund.org/explore/exhibitions/2025/05/02/gardening)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## 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, highlighting the transformative and radical impact of gardening in Britain. The exhibition features items like the first English gardening manual from 1558 and Charles Darwin’s specimen collector from the Beagle voyage. It also includes films by the Coco Collective, an Afro-diaspora led community garden in London, and an art installation by Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, reimagining our relationship with gardens and the natural world.
3. <https://events.bl.uk/exhibitions/unearthed-the-power-of-gardening> - The British Library's official page for the 'Unearthed: The Power of Gardening' exhibition, running from May 2 to August 10, 2025. The exhibition showcases a diverse collection of gardening artifacts, including the first English gardening manual from 1558, Charles Darwin’s specimen collector from the Beagle voyage, and the only surviving illustrated Old English herbal. It also features films by the Coco Collective and an art installation by Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, exploring the role of gardening in health, community, and environmental change.
4. <https://www.capitalgrowth.org/coco-collective/> - A profile of the Coco Collective's Ital Community Garden in Lewisham, South London, featured in Capital Growth's Spotlight Garden program. The garden, founded during the pandemic, is an Afro-diaspora led community space that offers open days and community events. The profile includes perspectives from founder Valerie Goode, staff member Duke Baysee, and volunteer Sonia, highlighting the garden's role in community building, cultural heritage, and sustainable food practices.
5. <https://www.artfund.org/explore/exhibitions/2025/05/02/gardening> - An overview of the 'Gardening' exhibition at the British Library, running from May 2 to August 10, 2025. The exhibition celebrates the transformative power of gardening in Britain, featuring rare treasures like Anglo-Saxon herbal remedies and the first printed gardening manual of 1564. It also includes art, pamphlets, and botanical works, uncovering how gardening has shaped society, sparked activism, and connected communities. The exhibition features films by the Coco Collective and a striking art installation by Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg.
6. <https://www.gardenerscompany.org.uk/news/british-library-gardening-exhibition/> - An announcement from the Worshipful Company of Gardeners about the British Library's 'Gardening' exhibition, running from May 2 to August 10, 2025. The exhibition explores the transformative, enriching, and sometimes radical power of gardening in Britain, featuring items like the only surviving illustrated collection of herbal remedies from Anglo-Saxon England and the first gardening manual printed in 1564. It also includes paintings, pamphlets, and richly illustrated botanical works, revealing how gardening has contributed to social and political change throughout history.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/25/inside-london-windrush-gardens-caribbean-aoe> - An article from The Guardian exploring the Caribbean horticultural heritage in London, focusing on gardens created by the Windrush generation. The article highlights the Sowing Roots exhibition at the Garden Museum in Lambeth, which showcases how Caribbean horticultural traditions have enriched British gardening. It tells the stories of individuals through interview extracts, photographs, and artifacts, shedding light on the varied traditions that Caribbean people carried with them when they moved to Britain.