

## The Guerrilla Gardener

Ron Finley inspires people to transform food deserts into food forests, one strip of land at a time. By Martha Cheng

### WHO HE IS

Ron Finley—an artist, fashion designer and former personal trainer—used to drive an hour round-trip from his home in South Central Los Angeles just to find healthy food. He lived in what he called a “food prison,” with limited access to fresh fruit and vegetables. On top of that, he was sick of seeing everything from condoms to water heaters discarded in front of his home. Finley asked, “Why can’t we have beauty in our community? Why can’t we walk down the street and see hummingbirds and be kissed by dragonflies? You want me to smell the roses, but there’s none there.”

Go to [ronfinley.com](http://ronfinley.com) to learn more.

### WHAT HE DID

In 2010, Finley planted carrots, chard, pomegranate saplings, towering banana trees and other fruits and vegetables in the 10-by-150-foot strip of dirt wedged between the street and sidewalk in front of his house. A year later the city cited him for not having the \$400 permit required to garden on city-owned land. But, even after an arrest warrant, he stood his ground. Media coverage and a community petition helped to get the warrant suspended. Then, Finley worked to overturn ordinances that had made it illegal for residents to create sidewalk vegetable gardens. “Basically, it started as therapy for myself,” Finley says. “But it turned out to be therapy for the neighborhood.”

### WHY IT'S COOL

Finley has become a guerrilla gardening guru. His TED Talk on reclaiming abandoned lots with vegetable gardens has racked up nearly 3 million views. Schools and organizations from England to Qatar enlist his advice on planting gardens. On a local level, he’s helped create more than 25 fruit and vegetable plots in the Los Angeles area. Kimberly Cooper, a public health activist who has helped Finley get the word out about kids learning to grow food, says, “He planted a carrot and all hell broke loose. He created this opportunity to see what can be beautified, but also how it can change your health. That’s the even bigger impact that he’s had.”



STEPHEN ZIEGLER