

## INTRODUCTION

# The 'Plot' of *Radical Gardening*

Certain gardens are described as retreats when they are really attacks.

Ian Hamilton Finlay

Social historians hardly ever mention gardens or gardening, and garden historians have little to say generally about politics.

Martin Hoyles, *The Story of Gardening*

In the common perception, gardening is understood as suburban, as leisure activity, as television makeover opportunity. The narratives of its origin are seen as religious or spiritual (Garden of Eden), military (the clipped lawn, the ha-ha and defensive ditches), aristocratic or monarchical (the stately home, the *Royal Horticultural Society*). *Radical Gardening* travels an alternative route, through history and across landscape, reminding us of the link between propagation with propaganda, or pomegranate and hand grenade. For everyday garden life is not only patio, barbecue, white picket fence, topiary, herbaceous border.... This book weaves together garden history with the counterculture, stories of individual plants with discussion of land use and public policy, the social history of campaign groups with the pleasure and dirt of hands in the earth, alongside media, pop and art references, to present an alternative view of gardens and gardening. To do this, the book draws from different disciplines, but 'it is not in fact very difficult to be "interdisciplinary" when it comes to gardens, because there is not really a "discipline" of garden study'.<sup>1</sup>

*Radical Gardening* is about the idea of the 'plot', and its alternate but interwoven meanings (there are three). Many of the plots we will explore are inspiring, and allow us to see how notions of utopia, of community, of activism for progressive social change, of peace, of environmentalism, of identity politics, are practically worked through in the garden, in floriculture, and through what Paul Gough has called 'planting as a form of protest'. But not all – some are sobering, or frightening, for within the territory of the politically 'radical' there have been and continue to be social experiments

and articulations that invert our positive expectations of the human exchange that occurs in the green open space of a garden. The book is modest in its ambitions: all I want to do is to convince you, dear reader-gardener, that those notions of a *horticountercultural politics* you suspected were in your earthy practice and pleasure (I agree that you probably didn't call them horticultural politics) have a rich and challenging tradition, a significance, as well as a trajectory of energy and import that makes them matter for our future. 'Why', asks writer-gardener Jamaica Kincaid, 'must people insist that the garden is a place of rest and repose, a place to forget the cares of the world, a place in which to distance yourself from the painful responsibility with being a human being?' I follow Kincaid, and join the likes of Martin Hoyles, Paul Gough, Kenneth Helphand and others, each of whose work on gardens has helped shape my own thinking, in insisting on a view of the garden which allows us to include the opposite.<sup>2</sup> Such a reading of the garden should not be a strange or forced juxtaposition of plant and ideology: think only of the English radical writer William Cobbett, who declared in 1819 that 'if I sowed, planted or dealt in seeds; whatever I did had first in view the destruction of infamous tyrants'. Or think of the source of the word propaganda – which today refers to the organized art of political persuasion – deriving from the Latin verb *propagare*, to propagate. Or the twentieth century revolutionary playwright Bertolt Brecht who observed, with startling accusatory power, that 'famines do not occur, they are organized by the grain trade'. Or the female Colombian activist speaking to western buyers on behalf of the 40,000 women working in the pesticidal contemporary Colombian flower industry: 'Behind every beautiful flower is a death. Flowers grow beautiful while women wither away'.<sup>3</sup> Such horticultural glimpses as these show us that there is, potentially at least, a lengthy tradition of radical gardening, and this book is meant as one contribution to maintaining and (re)constructing that tradition.

I stated that there are three versions, three meanings of 'plot' in *Radical Gardening*, and these are land, history and politics. Firstly, there is the plot of the land, the garden space itself, how it is claimed, shaped, planted, and how we might understand some of the politics of flowers. As Lisa Taylor observes, in *A Taste for Gardening*,

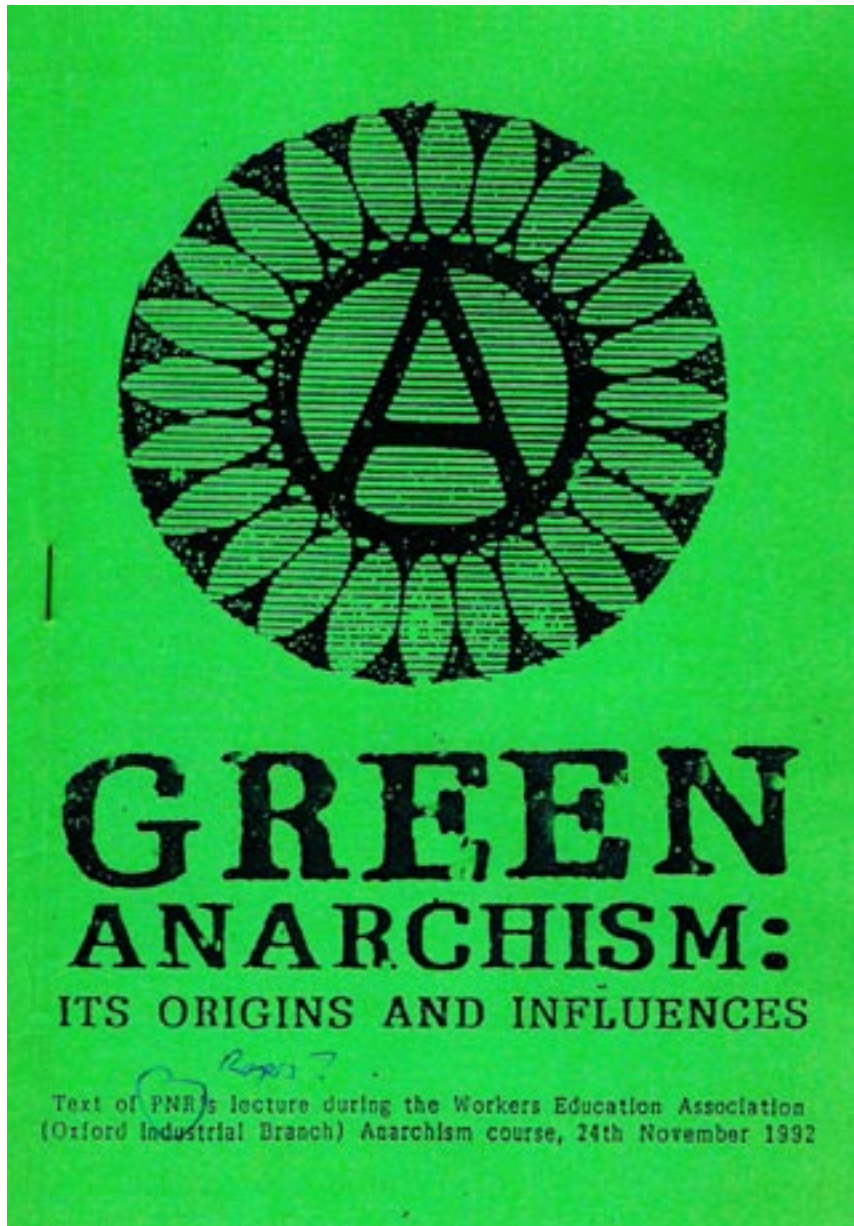


Figure 1. The horticultural counter-culture through its radical pamphlets: Green Anarchist (slogan: 'For the Destruction of Civilisation!')

Gardens are peculiar, hybrid spaces: part private, part public. In one sense they appear to exist as part of the private realm:... they are conceived and constructed as partially private extensions of the home dwelling. Gardens are also located close to spaces within the home which have been conceived as private, domestic, 'feminine' zones – the kitchen and the dining area for example. On the other hand, the garden is an interface between the privacy of the house and the civic property of the street. It is a space onto which others can look, examine and judge.

But there is more, both in terms of what the garden can signify and in terms of what we understand as a garden: from public parks to allotments, squatted community gardens to the 'polemic landscapes' of peace or fascist gardens, as well as the 'defiant garden', the plot is the territory under discussion, the patch of earth where it all happens. Many of the patches visited in the book are chosen because of their marginality – I am interested in the horticultural politics of the ex-centric, in the idea of *ruderal vegetation*, which refers to the kinds of plants (and, for me, planting) 'that grow in waste and particularly on disturbed sites, such as garbage dumps, vacant lots, and industrial wastelands'.<sup>4</sup> Also I am attracted to the stories of the plots that are no longer there, so marginal that they have been easily erased or pushed over the edge – the demolition by the city authorities of New York's community Garden of Eden in 1986 is surely emblematic here. There is lament for such lost patches, of course, but also a recognition of the spirit of celebration, and of the fact of political counter-organisation and re-mobilisation by activists.

Secondly, there is the plot as narrative or story, whether historical or contemporary. The book draws on what I view as a persistent tradition of writing which sets itself against the dominant narratives of gardening, and towards a radical gardening – from Cobbett through to the publication by New York autonomists of a book like *Avant Gardening* in 1999, for instance. It is evident in small magazines, pamphlets and websites produced by enthusiasts, counterculturalists and green activists, as well as at the margins of more easily identifiable left-wing publications like the magazine of 'socialist agriculture', *The Country Standard* (edited from the British Communist Party's national office through the 1950s and 1960s). It is arguable that, in the twentieth century, the new phenomenon of the mediation of gardening unproblematically replicated a certain social relationship: radio, newspaper

columns, and early television ‘established the public image of the head gardener, which passed into national acceptance’ in Britain, writes Jane Brown. Not only a professional expertise, but also a nostalgic nodding to an increasingly distant version of Englishness and its class distinction was being presented via the new media interest in gardening. This is not a route I follow. But, mostly the book is concerned with twentieth and twenty-first century narratives – there is I think, a good deal of detailed writing already available on, for instance, the profoundly political relationship between garden and empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Also I wanted this book to be able to speak to people’s contemporary situations fairly directly, and so chose more recent and current material.

Thirdly, we can understand the plot as the act of politicking, occasionally perhaps a dark conspiracy but much more often a positive, humanising gesture in a moment of change. In fact, as this book shows, gardening, gardens, flowers, planting have frequently been a terrain for ideological struggle; so the plot of *Radical Gardening* is the land itself, the history of the struggle, and the activism of the political conspiracy. May Day is a good date on which to start: it is the seasonal celebration of new growth and fertility around the rural maypole, it is the neo-pagans’ Beltane, *and* it is International Workers’ Day for trade unionists and industrial workers. May Day is the one day of the year when there is a coincidence of horticulture – including gardening – and radical politics, when the bucolic intermingles seasonally with the ideological. Community activist-gardener Heather C. Flores has written of being as ‘radical as a radish’, and goes on to define ‘radical’ in the context of gardening: it is ‘radical only in that it comes from, and returns to, the root of the problem: namely, how to live on the earth in peace and perpetuity.... Flowers are not the only thing that blooms in the garden – people do.’ For similar etymological reasons, writes Barbara Nemitz, we should recognize indeed that ‘plants are radical subjects ... from *radicalis*, something that is firmly rooted’.<sup>5</sup>

These three versions of the plot – land, history, politics – are interwoven. The garden can become the source of political identity or power, including in cases which speak more readily to the majority of people who are not or were not as privileged. The so-called ‘Votingham’ housing estates of the nineteenth century, for instance, were developed to exploit the link between freehold property ownership and the franchise; it is not going too far to argue



Figure 2. The horticultural counter-culture through its radical pamphlets: ‘Just dig it!’ introduces the writings of the seventeenth century Diggers to twentieth century youth

that it was the land itself, the garden of the house, that made parliamentary representation possible at that time: *no garden, no vote*. Alternatively, one might consider the contemporary notion of NIMBY as another political identity articulated specifically through land and garden: ‘Not In My Back Yard’ (curiously, often figured by people who do not have back yards, but extensive 360° gardens) is the voice of privileged self-interest from people who wish to protect what they have against what they view as the onslaught of modernity, which might be in the form of a proposed adjacent new nuclear power station, a motorway, or a wind farm, say.

Though a slow culture, the garden is not fixed, and can change remarkably. I am not thinking season-by-season, though such change is traditionally the life-cycle of the garden – even if the seasons themselves are under threat by the profoundly global political issue of climate change. I am thinking in terms of its ideology. For instance Jenny Uglow has reminded us that ‘many features in Victorian parks, like pavilions and pagodas, are being reborn [today] not as symbols of empire but of inclusion’. As society changes, it seems as though the garden remains the same, and yet it too alters. Does, should, the (idea of the) garden speak more forcibly to us nowadays? In *Nowtopia*, Chris Carlsson writes of a politics inscribed in the very act of ‘slowing down the gardener, making her pay attention to natural cycles that only make sense in the full unfolding of seasons and years. In a shared garden [especially], time opens up for conversation, debate, and a wider view than that provided by the univocal, self-referential spectacle promoted by the mass media’. Climate change, peak oil transition, community cohesion, the environment, genetic modification and food policy, diet, health and disability – the garden is the local patch which touches and is touched by all of these kinds of major global concerns, whether it wants that kind of attention or not. Peter Lamborn Wilson writes, perhaps with a note of incredulity, that “‘Cultivate your own garden” sounds today like hot radical rhetoric. Growing a garden has become – at least potentially – an act of resistance. But it’s not simply a gesture of refusal. It’s a positive act. It’s praxis’.<sup>6</sup>

It is intriguing to recall that, in Thomas More’s founding text of the genre, *Utopia*, while land and houses are held in common – each decade a property swap takes place, in a decennial cross between potlatch and lottery – and gardens are abundant, there remains a competitive edge between the utopians about the ‘trimming, husbanding and furnishing of their gardens, every man for his own part’.<sup>7</sup> It is within this dynamic between selfish and

social gardener identified so presciently in More’s utopian gardens that *Radical Gardening* is set. The early chapters of this book are shaped around the public and outward-facing politics of gardens, whether in the form of the use of the garden and landscape in the construction of national identity (as during fascism), or the place of the garden in social planning, such as in the green public spaces of the city. The later chapters are more concerned with the grassroots and personal politics of the garden. This includes the development or transformation of the garden as an act of conscious, often anti-establishment, political campaigning, and critical and historical exploration of ways in which the garden and its planting have functioned as a space for the expression of identity politics. The boundary between the early and the later chapters of the book is an untidy one, since some material crosses over, or refers back. But then the fact is that I am an untidy gardener, and enjoy the bursting clump or semi-covered path, the nettle and the dying branch. Writing this book has taken me away from my own garden, to which I feel a neglectful stranger. For several seasons of a year now I have privileged ideas and histories of social movements and green spaces over my own modest terraced strip of land. Very, very soon I am returning to my own plot, but I will be accompanied by a greater understanding of the other plots I have read and written about for *Radical Gardening*, and this has shifted my mind more than I expected. Over the years I have written numerous books about contemporary radicals, social experimenters, counterculturalists, and their movements and modes of (sometimes dis-)organisation. I always come away most of all impressed and moved by the creativity and idealism of the people involved, as well as to a lesser extent soberingly aware of the limitations and potential dangers that can go with pushing for social change. Gardeners I thought would be a major challenge to my normal methodology and anticipated results! I guess that’s why some years ago I started thinking about a book like this. But I am surprised once more, my own ignorance catching me out again. My hope is that you will find something new here, thought-provoking, inspiring, and that you will experience the sense of excitement I did on learning about ways the generous space of the garden can have political resonance. Do let me know, and if you’ve any cuttings or good seeds to share so much the better. If we are radical gardeners together is it possible that we might be able to save the world, just when it needs saving – *we* need saving – most?