

THE BIG ISSUE

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RISE OF THE MEGACITIES

How our urban areas are taking over

Have you woken to find that a number of pretty plants have appeared in your area overnight? That could be the work of guerilla gardeners, who give neglected areas a clandestine horticultural makeover. Alex Hannaford joins them

The email popped into my inbox the night before. "We're on," it read. "The location is the heart of Knightsbridge. I'll be there with some fellow troops from 9pm."

I felt like a CIA operative about to conduct an observation post on an elusive target. That was until I read the rest of the email: "Despite the overwhelming riches, there are still areas of horticultural neglect," it continued. "I have two brick planters in my sights, perhaps a

small shrubbery too."

I was about to join Richard Reynolds and his team of 'guerilla gardeners' for the night and although this was to be a clandestine operation, it would be a green-fingered one.

For the past couple of years Reynolds has been making London look prettier. Under the cover of darkness, together with a faithful band of followers, he fills his car up with bags of topsoil, huge bottles of water, and an impressive array of beautiful flowers and evergreens, and heads out to transform public areas of neglect. These could be



flower beds that have stood barren for years, weed-infested bases of trees, or even huge traffic islands.

The idea is simple: once they've been given a makeover by guerilla gardeners, these places will put a smile back on the faces of members of the local community who have to walk past them every day. It's the horticultural equivalent of giving a saggy-eyed, middle-aged housewife a facelift in her sleep.

The operation is a swift one. By about 9.05pm five people have pulled up in three cars next to the Brompton Oratory

people to get involved and take ownership of their communities. "People assume they're not allowed to do it," he says. "They assume they're going to get into huge trouble but hopefully they're not, which is why I'm happy to spread the word."

He's even roped his flatmate into helping. Meike is a

church, almost in the shadow of the Harrods department store. Top soil, bags of garden mulch, and plants are piled up next to two big trees in concrete 'planters' next to the busy road. The team put on gardening gloves, grab secateurs, and begin chopping away at the messy foliage that has swamped the base of the trees.

"I noticed these lime trees whilst I was walking past recently on my way to the V&A museum," Reynolds explains. "These are deciduous trees and all these shoots are disguising - which will be plain to see at the end of the summer - are great caverns that are full of litter and all sorts of nasty bits and pieces. We're going to clip back the trunks, tidy them up and fill them in with some decent soil and a few shrubs."

In theory, what Reynolds does is illegal. Incredibly it could be deemed to be vandalism, but he's never found himself in trouble with the law so far. Once somebody called the police and when they turned up and said "We hear you're stealing plants", Richard simply replied: "only dandelions".

Although people donate money via his website (even more since his recent appearance at the Chelsea Flower Show), and volunteers bring along plants and trees occasionally (an unwanted Christmas tree now stands in the middle of a roundabout somewhere near the South Bank), his projects are largely self-funded. Each 'job' can cost anywhere up to a £150, but Reynolds says people spend that sort of money each month going to the pub. "It's a hobby," he says. "I don't see myself as a do-gooder."

By day, Reynolds is an advertising planner. Two or three evenings a week he will re-visit plots he has worked on and make sure they're watered and the litter is picked up.

"I don't mind the fact that councils aren't doing this," he insists. "There are better things they can spend their money on, like tarmacing roads."

In fact, one council (which he won't name) sent him a cheque for £250 after his team revitalised a shabby area of green space in their borough.

"I make a point of not slagging councils off," he says. Reynolds is keen for more



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important part of the urban landscape is great. But a lot of these schemes are reliant - or even designed - to have expensive maintenance schedules, and that's not always necessary. If allotments could more naturally be incorporated into town planning, I think that's better because it's the process of gardening as much as the garden itself that's important."

The son of a Devon vicar, Reynolds says he comes from a family of keen gardeners. He also says he was encouraged to have green fingers at school, which, incidentally he attended with one Chris Martin of Coldplay. "One of our teachers was inspiring Chris to write rock records," he says, "while simultaneously buying me tomato plants."

Martin apparently didn't share his love of gardening. Reynolds lives in a sixth floor flat in Elephant And Castle "with no room even for a window box" and it was his love of green spaces - and seeing a lot of areas in need of improving - that drove him to start guerilla gardening.

"Once you start doing it, you notice them everywhere," he says. "It sort of became an addiction."

He's even roped his flatmate into helping. Meike is a

marketing manager originally from New Zealand and says her friends back home have a bit of a giggle at her expense but she loves it. "My kitchen suddenly became overrun with seedlings and lavender that didn't make it into the ground on previous digs, so I figured if you can't beat him, join him." She says Reynolds is an eccentric and has an uncanny ability to motivate a team of people.

Pam is another volunteer tonight. She started helping out in her local park - Brockwell in Brixton - when her boss asked whether she was a guerilla gardener. She hadn't heard the term, Googled it, and got in touch with Reynolds.

Originally from Canada, Anne works as a human-resources manager and says she sits behind a desk all day and can't face going to the gym, so guerilla gardening was a perfect solution. "It's a way of meeting new people and it's constructive as well," she says.

By 10.30pm it's over - almost. The guerilla gardeners disappear into the night, but Reynolds is off to get more soil. He'll be back in an hour to finish off. By the morning the small area will be transformed.

Reynolds says anyone can get involved. "You can do things as simple as planting daffodil bulbs or nasturtium seeds. Or just by picking up litter. It sounds really boring but it makes a huge difference to the appearance of an area, and hopefully lifts everyone's spirits."

www.guerillagardening.org