

BBC

WIN A DAY
WITH A WILDLIFE
PHOTOGRAPHER
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Somewhere in London, under cover of darkness, horticultural freedom fighters are digging and sowing to try and make the city a brighter place



Richard Reynolds works in communication by day and he plants flowers by night. Secretly.

A 6ft-something fella with high top curly hair a la Tim Burton, he's the last young man you'd expect to find loitering around dark alleys in London's Elephant and Castle. If you spot him clasping a suspect package down the New Kent Road – don't worry, it'll probably be a packet of dandelion seeds. The other big clue as to what's going on is the supermarket trolley stacked with compost, potted plants and rakes. Richard is flogging goodwill and a sense of community via flowers.

The Guerrilla Gardener maxim reads: "Let's fight the filth with forks and flowers", and it's a philosophy that seems very familiar these days. We may be under the shadow of recession, but according to many we're also on the brink of a golden age of giving. The upside of the downturn is that we're becoming less selfish. We are keener to help our neighbours, spreading the love and, it appears, spreading the compost. It's the reason that the National Trust is creating 1,000 new allotment plots on its land in the next three years, giving local communities the space to grow their own fruit and veg. And Dig In, a BBC campaign launched in April, gave away thousands of packets of seeds. Green fingers are the new black, it seems. But the new craze is not all about self-sufficiency. It's also about reconnecting with the soil – something that Richard thinks is vital.

The perfect crime

We met in an underground car park in SE1 at approximately 9.30pm. Richard was surrounded by a band of Guerrilla Gardeners (GGs). When you become a GG you enlist, join an existing cell, and fight back to reclaim this precious resource and cultivate it. The idea behind the battle is simple. Find a bit of abandoned and uncultivated land and plant some flowers.

With some difficulty we pushed the trolley laden with botanical stash through a very narrow gateway into the grubby streets illuminated by

vandal-proofed street lamps. Surprisingly, few people took any notice of us as we careened across one of London's most deadly roundabouts. Compost? Check. Mulch? Check. Purple wallflowers, lettuce seeds and hollyhock? Check. Richard's horticultural background means he knows what will survive and thrive in this shallow and, until now, fallow soil. And this literally is his patch. When our work here is done, he'll be able to survey the land from his flat, which overlooks it.

Brush with the law

The soil was tougher to crack than the economy. "Are you sure things will grow here?" I enquired. The team reassured me that they'd worked this turf before and all would be well. We marked out our target territory with string and got to work. Halfway through toiling the soil I heard a siren and saw blue flashing lights.

"Are we doing anything wrong officer?" I asked, clutching my half moon spade gingerly. One of the PCs muttered something about criminal damage and my heart was in my mouth. Fortunately, his colleague was far more jovial: "Well, we can hardly bang you up for improving Elephant and Castle, can we?" Phew. It transpires that the GGs and the Met have clashed spades before and come to a gentleman's agreement.

Richard isn't alone. There are GGs at work all over the world: Elise is a 71-year-old Parisian who "enjoys challenging authority and conformism". Ida and Li in Sweden noticed an enormous lack of colour in a nearby flowerbed and engaged in some serious pansy planting. Sophia and Hannah of Austria cleared away dog turds and cigarette butts from their university and hope people will "stop trashing and respect [their] work".

Our tiny swathe of green in Elephant and Castle wasn't a rhapsody of colour by night but it has survived and flourished, and it certainly makes the roundabout a better place. It's a revolution people. You may not be able to consume your gardening riches as a Guerrilla Gardener, but you and thousands of others will benefit aesthetically and maybe even emotionally. I dig it.





"Our tiny swathe of green in Elephant and Castle wasn't a rhapsody of colour by night, but it has flourished and it makes the area a better place"