

Anarchists who reach for the agapanthus

A new book lauds 'guerrilla gardeners' who break the law to beautify the land, says Louise Gray

Thank-you for the sunflowers," shouts the old woman over the roar of the traffic. "They were lovely!" Evidently, she approves of the strangers in wellies and luminous vests who, every few weeks, turn up at the dead of night to plant bulbs along the fume-choked roadside in her neighbourhood. Although what these so-called "guerrilla gardeners" are doing is illegal, she has no intention of calling the police.

Guerrilla gardening may sound anarchic, but it is the preserve of middle-class people frustrated by the downtrodden appearance of their local community. When I go out with a small band of them, armed only with trowel and pitchfork, I find well-spoken, university-educated, socially aware individuals – the kind of nice boys and girls you tend to see protesting against runways or signing petitions on climate change.

While a passing police car might slow to have a closer look, the law is far too busy – or sensible – to bother stopping. After all, what could be more community-spirited than quietly getting on with picking up litter and planting flowers?

Digging in some daffodils on a central reservation in East Dulwich, a well-to-do part of south-east London with a bohemian spirit, a charming accountant and a charity fundraiser tell me they were inspired to start sprucing up their



RICHARD REYNOLDS

neighbourhood after hearing a programme about guerrilla gardening on Radio 4 – how middle class is that?

The act of illicit gardening has a long history in Britain; some date it as far back as the Diggers, a group of socialists who fought for the right to cultivate land in the 17th century. Today, it is more commonly perceived as a hippie movement that grew out of the so-called Summer of Love in 1967, and has been causing problems ever since; think back to the May Day riots in London in 2000 when the statue of Winston Churchill was given an impromptu turf mohican.

But guerrilla gardening does not have to be a political act. It can be as genteel as planting cowslips on a neglected verge – which may be why it is being taken up by people who have never broken the law before.

Around the country, frustrated urban gardeners are digging up roundabouts; working mothers who can't get an allotment are spiking spears of asparagus into unused flower beds; and office workers are throwing "seed bombs" from train windows to brighten the daily commute.

Richard Reynolds, a strategic planner for an advertising

Digging in: an illicit touch-up for a roundabout in Southwark, south London

“The council was too embarrassed to ask him to stop”

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agency who learned how to garden from his mother and grandmother, is the unofficial leader of a growing movement in London. Frustrated by his lack of a garden in Elephant and Castle, one of the roughest areas of south London, in 2004 he decided to brighten up its notorious roundabouts.

Within months, he had caught the attention of the media. When the council finally cottoned on to what he was doing, it was too embarrassed to ask him to stop, and sanctioned the activity as a form of community gardening.

Next month Mr Reynolds's book, *On Guerrilla Gardening*, is available in paperback. It contains advice about fighting weeds and bad soil conditions, rather than offering tactics for avoiding the police ("fighting the filth with fork and flowers", as he puts it). So successful is the movement Mr Reynolds inspired that he now addresses horticultural societies around the country, including at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew.

He admits that it is largely the middle classes who are attracted by guerrilla gardening. "It involves those who are interested in gardens, which does make it middle-class. But there is something anarchistic

about what we are doing because we are not asking for permission – not because we want to bring down the state," he says, "but because the state is befuddled in bureaucracy, and it is simpler just to get on with it than to wait for them to do it."

Tom Clougherty, of the Right-wing think tank the Adam Smith Institute, agrees that the rise of guerrilla gardening is a direct result of the interfering state. "It is absurd the amount of hoops you have to jump through when you are doing something most people would appreciate," he says. "If people want to make their community cleaner and more beautiful, they should be supported."

However, the gardening aristocracy is less certain. Monty Don, a grow-your-own advocate, is uncomfortable with anything that does not have official permission. "Guerrilla gardening is pretty dysfunctional behaviour because it tries to bypass communities as well as legislation and bureaucracy," he says. "There is a strong element of japes and quick-fix about it, without any meaningful engagement."

But Mr Reynolds argues that the movement will only get bigger during the credit crunch as people look for places to grow vegetables. "There is an increasing realisation that the focus on our personal betterment is not making us happy," he says. "Going out there and taking responsibility for a shared space with other people, on the other hand, can warm the soul."

● *'On Guerrilla Gardening' by Richard Reynolds (Bloomsbury) is published in paperback next month. To reserve your copy for £8.99 plus 99p p&p, go to Telegraph Books, or call 0844 871 1515; books.telegraph.co.uk*