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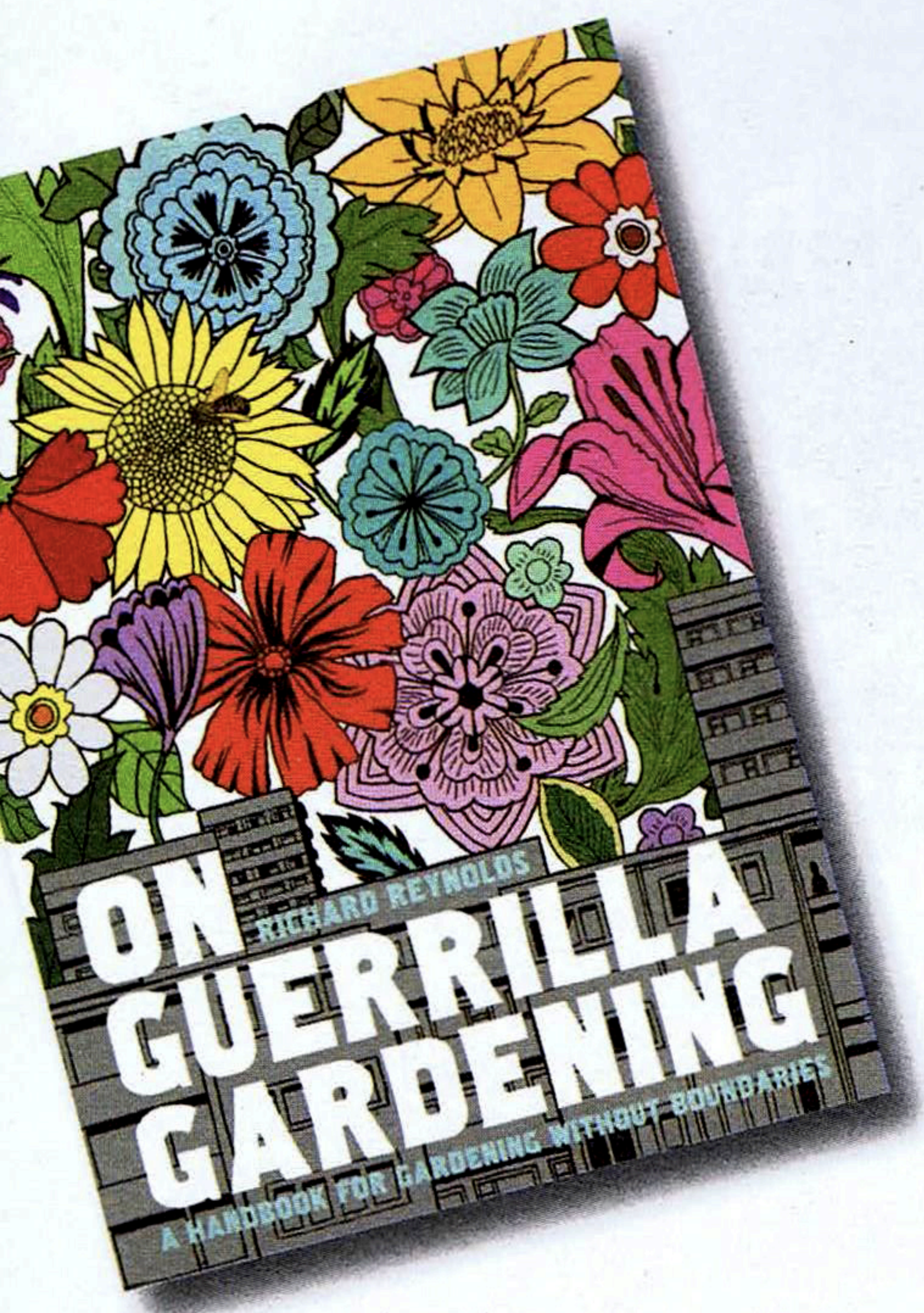
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Guerrilla Gardening

Most gardeners have their hands full dealing with weeds and pests. But for **Richard Reynolds**, part of a growing global movement to tackle neglect of our public spaces with illicit cultivation, gardening presents one or two other challenges.



It's just past midnight and at this hour nearly four years ago I was making the final preparations for my first act of guerrilla gardening. In the shadowy entrance of my high rise flat, I started tending the neglected planters, without being asked, without discussion and most pointedly – without permission. Well tonight it is pouring with rain and though there are faded daffodils to clear away, I am indoors spending the early hours reflecting on a few questions about what I, and hundreds around the world, do as guerrilla gardeners.

Guerrilla gardening is 'the illicit cultivation of someone else's land'. We garden where we see potential and without permission. Regardless of ethics, it is against the law. I have been threatened with arrest for criminal damage – my crime was clearing some weeds and litter from beneath a road sign and planting it with campanula, primula and lavender. I have been pulled over and searched under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for driving across Blackfriars Bridge with a car loaded with bags of wood chippings (that police feared was a bomb).

But my brushes with the law are trivial distractions in comparison with the grim opposition guerrilla gardeners in some other countries face. In Honduras, they battled against tear gas to cultivate an abandoned banana plantation and in Berkley California a man was shot dead at a protest to save a park created from a derelict car park by guerrilla gardeners.

Fighting neglect

My fight is not with the law. In Britain trouble is actually very rare. When caught red-handed (or should that be green-handed) conversation usually concludes with bemused encouragement, most recently from two delighted police officers who found three of us planting sunflower seeds in a neglected rose bed opposite the Houses of Parliament. My fight is with neglect and with the scarcity of land. Neglect of public land in particular is enemy number one – it's space that has the potential to be appreciated by many people (and as public space I avoid being charged with trespass) and in a world of increasing pressure on a finite (and depleting) resource



that is land, leaving it wild – particularly in an urban context – is a blight on the landscape, is unproductive and a honey pot for antisocial human wildlife rather than bumblebees.

'Work within the system' I hear you say. 'Yes,' is my response, 'that's fine where you can'. There are many wonderful charitable organisations that transform neglected urban space and even a new government funded military outfit greening our cities in the form of the BBC's S.W.A.T. (Spring Watch Action Teams) force, that will have transformed fifty spaces by the end of next weekend. Where guerrilla gardeners fit into this ecology of public gardening is that we tack on the patches of land where permission is difficult to grant. Some are 'orphaned land', places where the landowner or contractor has forgotten their responsibilities or abandoned them altogether.

Whose responsibility?

Typically these are boundary areas. One of my guerrilla gardens falls into this category. It is a huge traffic island in south London that straddles the border of Lambeth and Southwark Council that we have filled with lavender, tulips, foxgloves and irises. The two councils were unsure of their responsibilities here and mooted Transport for London as the possible authority instead, and making roadside verges look beautiful is not a priority.

Health and safety is a huge barrier to permission. Much as some public landowners would love volunteers to tend their space, giving permission requires them to take responsibility for our wellbeing. And with traffic close by, the possibility of unearthing cables and the danger we might cause to others, gardening in the fringes is a minefield of risks and red tape. If we do it as guerrillas we are taking personal responsibility. It need not be big and scary!

Small scale change

Guerrilla gardeners also take on plots of land that are so insignificant in scale or so nearly part of their garden that troubling the authority seems a pedantic time-wasting complexity and the risks to anyone terribly slight. Take for example a weedy tree pit in the pavement outside your house. Is it really worth the effort of finding out if you can garden here? Is anyone really going to mind? Better give it a go and find out later is the guerrilla gardeners approach.

Sean, a guerrilla gardener I met in North London, started this way, by planting amaranths in a tree pit outside his tiny terraced house and his success

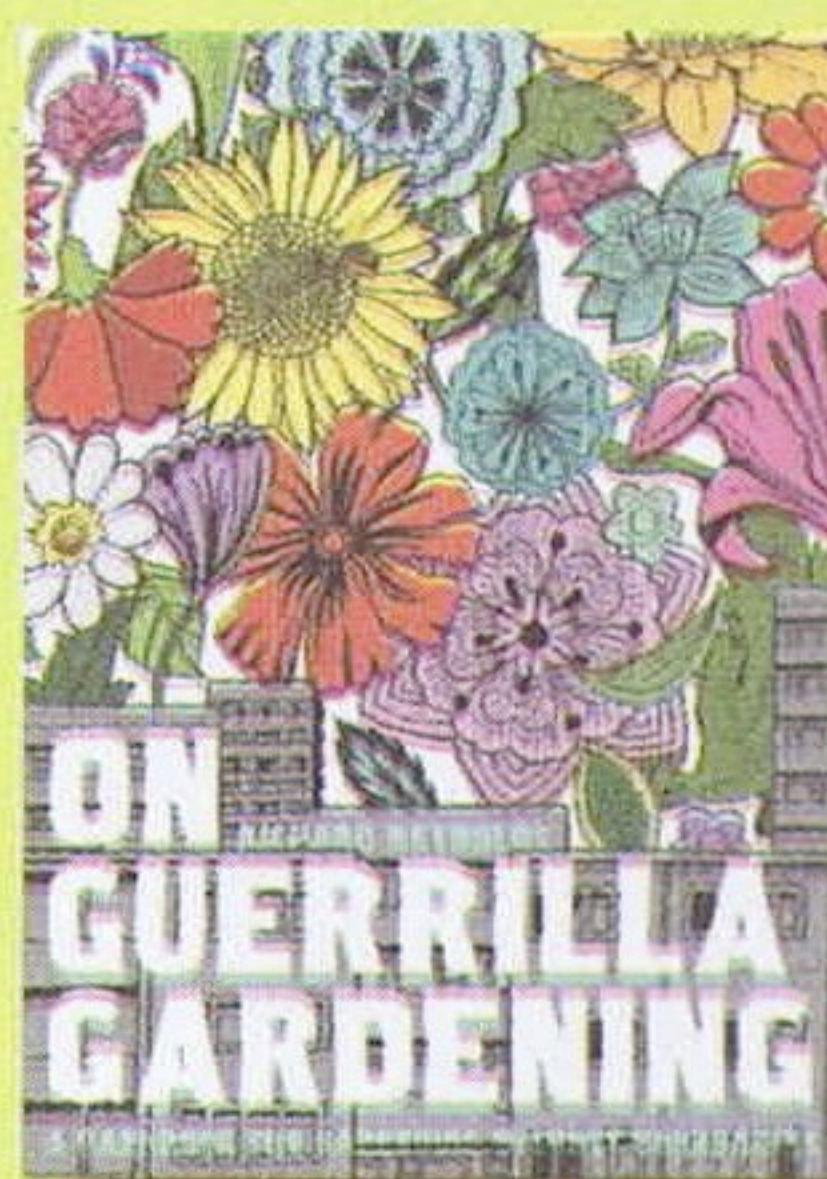
led him to plant every tree pit in the street. After a couple of years the council tracked him down but they had seen the spectacle as glorious and learnt of the pleasure the guerrilla gardens were giving local residents and happily endorsed his work. They even offered to remove more paving slabs for him so the gardens could be extended.

This outcome, should it come, is a triumphant moment for the guerrilla gardener. You have taken the land and transformed it on your terms, and now you have the reassurance that comes with permission. Zachary, a guerrilla gardener in New York told me that for him 'guerrilla gardening is how you get something started, but community gardening is the follow-through.' It worked for me too.

Getting permission

Three years on from my first guerrilla gardening, I was given permission to continue as I wished in that location. With permission came a cancelled service charge and refund for every resident of our tower (to make up for the fraudulent charging). But most importantly, we all have a cheerful uplifting landscape outside and a fun conversation starter. So did I really need to be a guerrilla gardener here? This was a win-win situation. I asked that question to Southwark Council, and the woman responsible for managing my tower block gave me a brief categorical answer, 'absolutely not'.

The gardens around my tower block have had a good watering tonight. My fight there now is just the usual gardener's skirmishes with the weeds, pests and litter. But at the back of my mind is a nagging question that my neighbours have not yet asked. Who am I to decide what is grown here? What if someone takes a dislike to my black tulips in favour of bluebells? Although where I garden solves my enemy neglect, I cannot solve the scarcity of land. If more people want to garden then guerrilla gardens themselves are potentially threatened – I risk an attack from those who fight against floral frippery in favour of veg. Perhaps one morning I will wake to discover a brand new guerrilla garden outside. 🖐️



**On Guerilla Gardening:
A Handbook for
Gardening Without
Boundaries**

by Richard Reynolds

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