

Big green guerillas

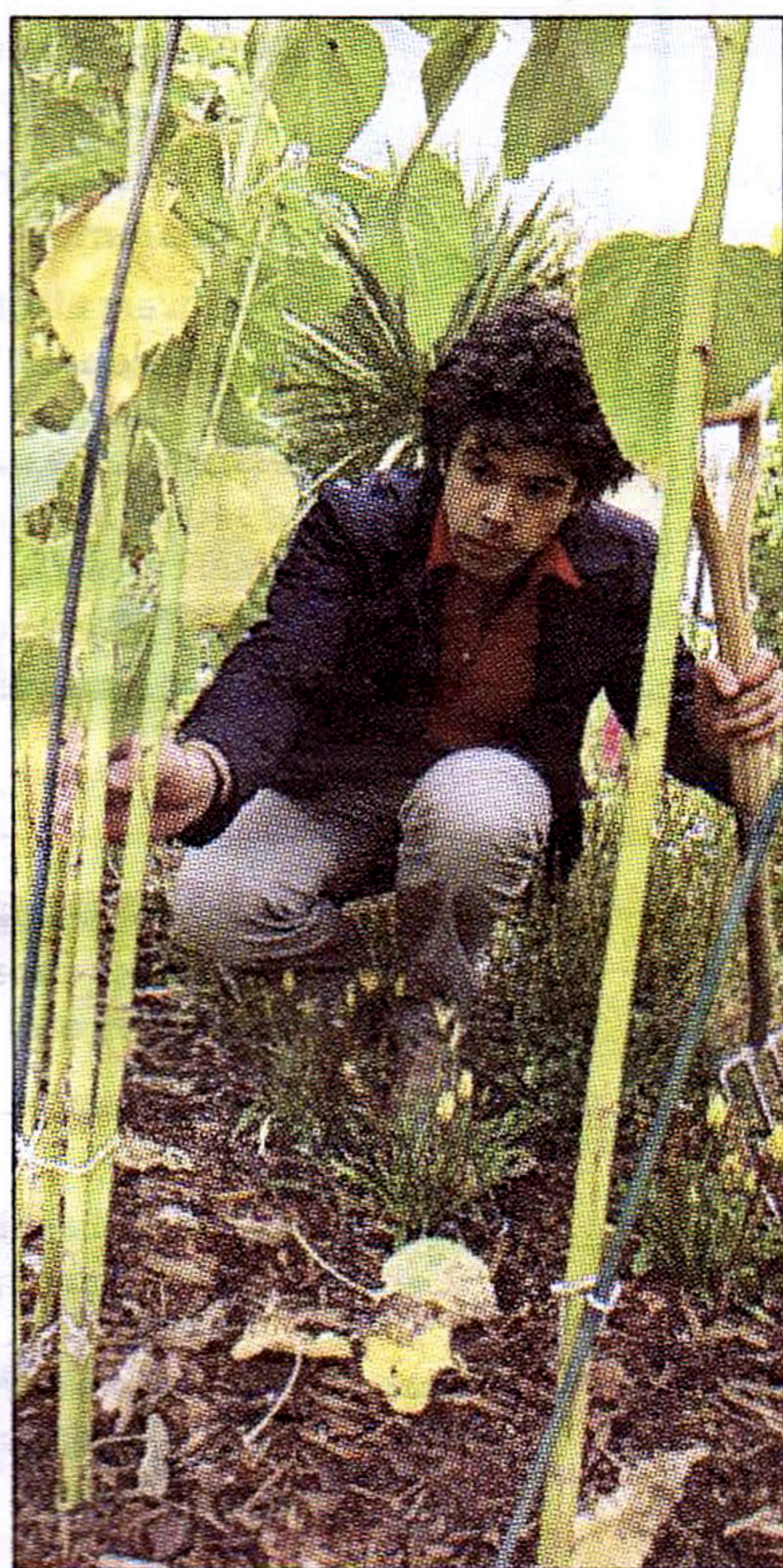


Pattie Barron meets the gang of garden guerillas liberating London's forgotten wastelands

AFURTIVE, nocturnal makeover of the neglected tubs outside his home, a high-rise council flat on an estate where he lived at the Elephant & Castle, was how it started. Then, passionate gardener Richard Reynolds crept out further, spade in one hand, plants in the other, applying TLC to public patches: a tree pit here, a roadside verge there.

Now, four years on, and many London landscape makeovers later, Reynolds is the leader of the city's fast-increasing troops of guerilla gardeners who clean up urban wastelands — central reservations at their peril — and brighten them with seeds, bulbs and plants, tending them long-term so they're not reclaimed by weeds or the council. Reynolds is considered a horticultural hero and revolutionary; where once he scabbled around for plants, now London's garden centres, including The Chelsea Gardener, call Reynolds and offer to donate leafy arms to the cause.

"It started because I didn't have anywhere to garden," he says, "so I thought, 'I'll do it out there.' And because I like spreading the message — I'm an ad man by trade — I started a website and a blog. It's become a war against neglect of public space." Reynolds, the son of a Devon vicar, is the first to admit the notion of greening the public highways is not his. He just called himself a guerilla gardener, then while on the net, had



Richard Reynolds, leader of the pack; guerrilla gardeners weed the lavender field they planted a stone's throw from Lambeth North Tube



Left, tulip bulbs planted at dead of night add a spring colour splash; right, red-hot pokers and lavender brighten the Lambeth landscape

a eureka moment when he plugged into a global guerilla gardening movement and found that activists were claiming "orphan land" from Amsterdam to San Francisco; in New York, they've been doing it since the early Seventies.

What Reynolds has done through his website is mobilise local troops with his battlecry: "Let's fight the filth with fork and flowers!" And he's given them a place to sign on, marshal troops for future digs and trade plants and experiences. The movement is stylish, the planting has bravura, with flowers and foliage that supply "shock and awe", says Reynolds, who has also, of course, written an official handbook, *On Guerrilla Gardening*. "We're graffiti gardeners," he says with pride, "tagging the landscape." When the troops can't gain access,

they lob seed bombs — flower seeds mixed with clay dust and fertiliser — over fences and railings to transform grimy city spaces.

On the whole, though, high-impact, block planting is the way to go, says Reynolds; as these landscapes are often viewed at speed, they need to make a strong visual stamp. And there's another reason to discourage romantic planting, he points out. "One member, Brita 1198, sowed a wonderful wildflower meadow on Hogarth roundabout, but it was repeatedly mown down by Transport for London, who saw it as a bank of weeds. Defeated, she gave up." However, says Reynolds, the chief enemies are litter and weeds, not the council or police. "The only time I've been stopped was when I was ferrying a carload

'The only time I was stopped was when I was ferrying chipping mulch. The police thought it was high-explosive fertiliser'

of wood chipping mulch, in white plastic sacks, and the police pulled me over," he adds. "They thought it was high-explosive fertiliser."

Reynolds's territory is south London; after all, he can't be everywhere, and he has a day job: he is an advertising planner, currently working on an O2 project. The troops are all over town, though, sometimes in numbers, such as the Camden group that is working its way along the Regent's Canal, digging up brambles, planting sunflowers and runner beans; sometimes solo, such as Helen 1106, who has visions of the metropolis covered in leaf, and so, for starters, has been settling scraps of ivy into pavement pockets around the Bank of England.

The flowering (and scenting) of a traffic island in Westminster

Bridge Road is what Reynolds calls his finest hour. He and his merry band planted 200 lavender bushes, supplementing them with scarlet tulip bulbs. "In polluted areas, fragrant plants provide a natural air freshener," he says. The floor of his front room is where the buds are dried to be parcelled in hessian bags stamped with the GG logo, then sold to fund fresh digs.

Sunflowers are Reynolds's bloom of choice. Last May he mischievously sowed seeds of Russian Giant sunflowers in a neglected rose bed opposite Parliament. In August, the plants were nearly 10ft high. He points out: "Sunflower seedlings don't get nibbled by slugs and snails, which prefer the green motorway of London's gardens to the tough grit of city pavements."

Now Reynolds is in demand to spread the word; the British Council has invited him to Botswana next week to encourage locals to take the initiative. "Train your eyes to see the landscape in a new and exciting way," is his message to all locals, whether in Botswana or Bayswater. He is proud of what he has achieved and is confident that London's councils won't dig up what he and his fellow guerillas have planted thus far. After all, councils might confuse wildflowers for weeds and cut them down, but to dig up a field of lavender in the centre of a dual carriageway? Now that would be the real act of vandalism.

THE GUERRILLA GARDENER'S PLANT ARSENAL:

"Choose your weapon well and it will grow and flourish," says Reynolds. His suggestions — tough customers all — would work well, too, in a low-maintenance London garden.

- **Drought tolerant:** hebe, candytuft, Sedum acre
- **Shade tolerant:** foxglove, Scilla siberica, cyclamen
- **Poor-soil tolerant:** nasturtiums, Achillea millefolium
- **Rubble resistant:** pot marigolds, euonymus, lilac
- **Wind resistant:** forsythia, juniper, Dactylis grass
- **Aerial plants:** self-seeders Californian poppy, cosmos, buddleia
- **Weed suppressants:** Geranium Johnson's Blue, Ajuga reptans, ivy.

JOIN THE MOVEMENT, BUY THE HANDBOOK:

Find planting tips, seed bomb recipes, dig dates, Reynolds' blog and more at www.guerrillagardening.org. On Guerrilla Gardening (Bloomsbury) costs £14.99, but you can buy it through the website for £8.99, plus p & p.

Don't miss Matthew Appleby's Gardening News:
Visit www.geocities.com/matthew_appleby



Pot marigolds, sown from seed, will thrive in soil riddled with builder's rubble



Thanks to Richard Reynolds and his band of guerrilla gardeners, an impressive bank of extra-tall sunflowers sprung up last summer in a neglected rose bed opposite the Houses of Parliament

Pictures by
Richard
Reynolds

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