

Outside space

The subversive spade brigade

Unlovely urban spaces are being beautified by 'guerrilla gardeners', writes **Simon Busch**

It is not often you are stopped and searched under the UK's Prevention of Terrorism Act in the cause of gardening. Richard Reynolds was driving across Blackfriars Bridge in London with his 1969 MG stuffed to the gills with bags of leaf mulch. The police pulled him over and thought he might be driving a fertiliser bomb towards Big Ben or Buckingham Palace. Eventually he managed to assure them that he was interested in planting, not pyrotechnics, but even Reynolds acknowledges that he was engaged in a kind of subversion.

He is one of a growing breed of "guerrilla gardeners", who attack the unlovely spaces in towns and cities across the world without permission, arming themselves with shovels and hoes and leaving pretty displays of flowers and shrubbery in their wake.

It all started when Reynolds moved into a high-rise apartment in the inner London district of Elephant and Castle. It is a pleasant flat, brighter and airier than you expect in such a gritty part of the city. But, unlike his previous accommodation, in salubrious Maida Vale, the new abode lacked any sort of outside space and Reynolds soon began to experience gardening withdrawal.

As luck would have it, he found "a completely neglected planter right on [his] doorstep" but unfortunately it was not, in any straightforward sense, his to use. He first tried the official channels, attending a tenants' meeting, which "imploded" in shouting matches between residents, then dropping letters in neighbours' mailboxes urging collective action to improve the gardening around the block. But this was to no avail. Finally, he decided it was simply "common sense" for him to steal out one night by himself and begin digging up the large, temptingly bare flowerbed at the bottom of his tower block.

Three years later, in mid-summer on the edge of the dust-and-traffic maelstrom that is the Elephant and Castle intersection, the legacy of that first "dig" is a revelation. The once parched tub is in blooming health with lilacs, pansies, marigolds and a single, proud tomato plant forming a broad, bustling mixed border.

Reynolds quickly realised that the spirit of guerrilla gardening, as he would come to call it, was hungry. Soon scraps of land beyond his high-rise caught his eye. One on his route to work – a round-



Sun lovers: an oasis of sunflowers in central London after an attack by guerrilla gardeners

Charlie Bibby

about with an obelisk "swishly landscaped" in limestone but since fallen into disrepair – could not be ignored.

One evening he and a handful of friends gathered to dig up the inset elliptical flowerbed, within which all that remained were two tough cordelia and weeds. At first they planted sunny, simple plants, such as coreopsis and rudbeckia, but few survived; the urban environment of abundant concrete and cars is an arid one for plants. Now a Mediterranean shrubbery, amply spaced and neat beneath a layer of wood chips, thrives on the island amid the traffic.

Reynolds began to assume the role of a latter-day, urban Johnny Appleseed. His message, as he describes it now, took shape. "Don't be obsessed by the decking and bamboo in your poxy little back garden," he says. "In fact, don't even bother having a back garden. Live in a high-rise and look after the communal space. If all the ground I cultivated was actually my own, I'd be paying a fortune for it. People go to the garden centre and think: 'I can't get this, I can't

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get that.' I never have that problem. I always have somewhere to put things."

The promulgation of his arguments in a blog won him increasing attention. He has been invited to speak at international landscaping conferences and has a book contract with Bloomsbury; *On Guerrilla Gardening*, for which he has postponed his advertising career, is due for completion early next year.

The internet was also the obvious means to recruit other people to his cause. I rendezvous with Reynolds and his growing band of followers one evening to plant some donated irises on a median strip. Among the crew are two

regulars, Tim, a tax adviser, and Lyla, a charity worker; there is also a first timer, an air stewardess.

We plant the bulbs in bunches of three. But, after that, other than a little weeding, there is little to do. The strip, dominated by big clumps of lavender, is so well maintained – in such contrast to the usual loveless council effort – that, once a couple of drunks offering advice have been placated, the dig is over.

Another thing Reynolds discovered online was that he was not alone. Guerrilla gardening goes back to before he began colonising south London as his backyard; its roots lie in New York, in the 1970s, when a young artist, Liz Christy, noticed tomato seedlings growing from rubbish on wasteland in the then slummy Bowery area of Manhattan. She and other pioneers formed a group to transform unused or abused (mainly by drug dealers) patches of the city into gardens. They called themselves the Green Guerrillas and what they shared, says Steve Frill-

man, executive director of the enduring group, was a readiness "to get off the couch and out of the apartment and stick with improving their neighbourhood".

The global crop of guerrillas shares that élan, along with a simple urge to garden in an often-frustrating urban environment. Julia Jahnke, in Berlin, says: "I've always been a passionate gardener and, a year after moving to the big city and not having a garden, I just started cultivating an empty lot and making it into a beautiful space." Miami resident Stephanie Spiegel has, with accomplices garnered online, also been "seed-bombing" abandoned building sites near her clothing boutique in the city.

The New York group soon became legitimate, paying peppercorn rents to the city. But Reynolds's troupe, like other such burgeoning outfits around the world, retains a scent of the illicit, which is, of course, part of its appeal.

www.guerrillagardening.org

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Growing global

One to see now
Scotland, UK

What for?

The spectacle of sheets of purple heather on the hillsides. Visit Cherrybank Gardens in Perth to see more than 900 varieties of the plant and Speyside Heather Centre for heather history, themed gifts and a helping of hot cloutie dumpling, a traditional Scottish pudding.



One to have
Erica carnea "Springwood White"

Why?

For its racemes of white flowers, a change from the usual pinks and purples. There are many types of heather, with flowers at different times of the year. This one is a welcome sight in the depths of winter. Most heathers prefer acid soil but *Erica carnea* will tolerate mildly alkaline conditions.



Diane Summers