Outside space

The subversive spade brigade

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

t 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 about with an obelisk "swishly land-[his] doorstep" but unfortunately it was scaped" in limestone but since fallen not, in any straightforward sense, his to into disrepair – could not be ignored. the bottom of his tower block.

Three years later, in mid-summer on the traffic. that is the Elephant and Castle intersec- a latter-day, urban Johnny Appleseed. tional landscaping conferences and has in New York, in the 1970s, when a her clothing boutique in the city. tion, the legacy of that first "dig" is a His message, as he describes it now, a book contract with Bloomsbury; On young artist, Liz Christy, noticed The New York group soon became revelation. The once parched tub is in took shape. "Don't be obsessed by the Guerrilla Gardening, for which he has tomato seedlings growing from rub- legitimate, paying peppercorn rents to blooming health with lilac, pansies, mari- decking and bamboo in your poxy little postponed his advertising career, is due bish on wasteland in the then the city. But Reynolds's troupe, like golds and a single, proud tomato plant back garden," he says. "In fact, don't for completion early next year.



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

use. He first tried the official channels, One evening he and a handful of attending a tenants' meeting, which friends gathered to dig up the inset "imploded" in shouting matches elliptical flowerbed, within which all between residents, then dropping letters that remained were two tough cordelia in neighbours' mailboxes urging collec- and weeds. At first they planted sunny, tive action to improve the gardening simple plants, such as coreopsis and around the block. But this was to no rudbeckia, but few survived; the urban avail. Finally, he decided it was simply environment of abundant concrete and 'common sense" for him to steal out one cars is an arid one for plants. Now a

forming a broad, bustling mixed border. even bother having a back garden. Live The internet was also the obvious She and other pioneers formed a the world, retains a scent of the illicit, Reynolds quickly realised that the in a high-rise and look after the commu- means to recruit other people to his group to transform unused or abused which is, of course, part of its appeal. spirit of guerrilla gardening, as he would nal space. If all the ground I cultivated cause. I rendezvous with Reynolds and (mainly by drug dealers) patches of come to call it, was hungry. Soon scraps was actually my own, I'd be paying a his growing band of followers one the city into gardens. They called www.guerrillagardening.org of land beyond his high-rise caught his fortune for it. People go to the garden evening to plant some donated irises on themselves the Green Guerrillas and

'People go to the garden centre and think: "I can't get this, I can't get that." never have that problem because I always have somewhere to put things'

timer, an air stewardess.

three. But, after that, other than a lit- neighbourhood". tle weeding, there is little to do. The The global crop of guerrillas shares dig is over.

slummy Bowery area of Manhattan. other such burgeoning outfits around eye. One on his route to work - a round- centre and think: 'I can't get this, I can'

regulars, Tim, a tax adviser, and Lyla, a man, executive director of the endurcharity worker; there is also a first ing group, was a readiness "to get off the couch and out of the apartment We plant the bulbs in bunches of and stick with improving their

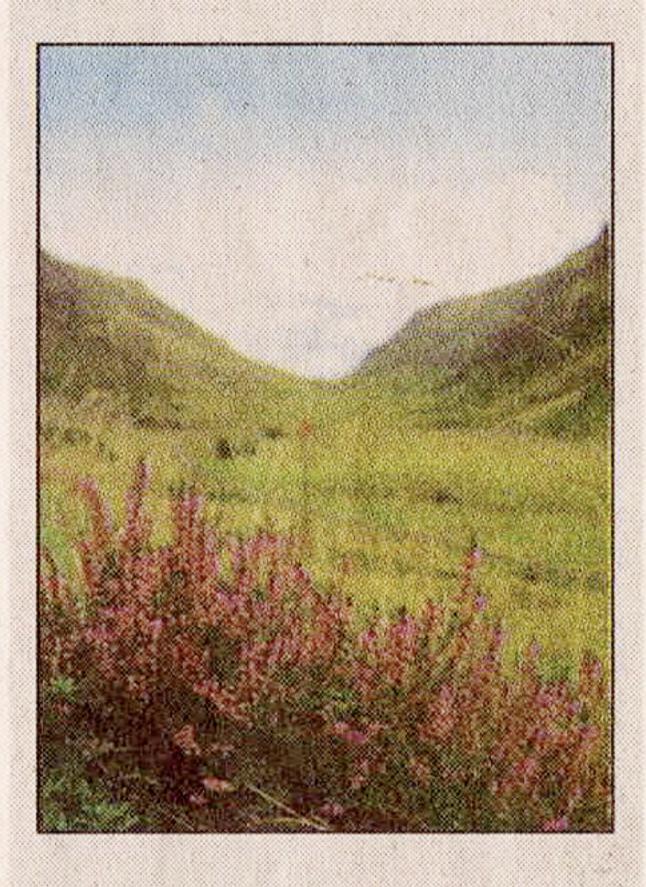
strip, dominated by big clumps of lav- that élan, along with a simple urge to ender, is so well maintained – in such garden in an often-frustrating urban contrast to the usual loveless council environment. Julia Jahnke, in Berlin, effort - that, once a couple of drunks says: "I've always been a passionate garoffering advice have been placated, the dener and, a year after moving to the big city and not having a garden, I just night by himself and begin digging up Mediterranean shrubbery, amply get that.' I never have that problem. I Another thing Reynolds discovered started cultivating an empty lot and makthe large, temptingly bare flowerbed at spaced and neat beneath a layer of always have somewhere to put things." online was that he was not alone. ing it into a beautiful space." Miami resiwood chips, thrives on the island amid The promulgation of his arguments in Guerrilla gardening goes back to dent Stephanie Spiegel has, with accoma blog won him increasing attention. He before he began colonising south plices garnered online, also been "seedthe edge of the dust-and-traffic maelstrom Reynolds began to assume the role of has been invited to speak at interna- London as his backyard; its roots lie bombing" abandoned building sites near

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 clootie dumpling, a traditional Scottish pudding.

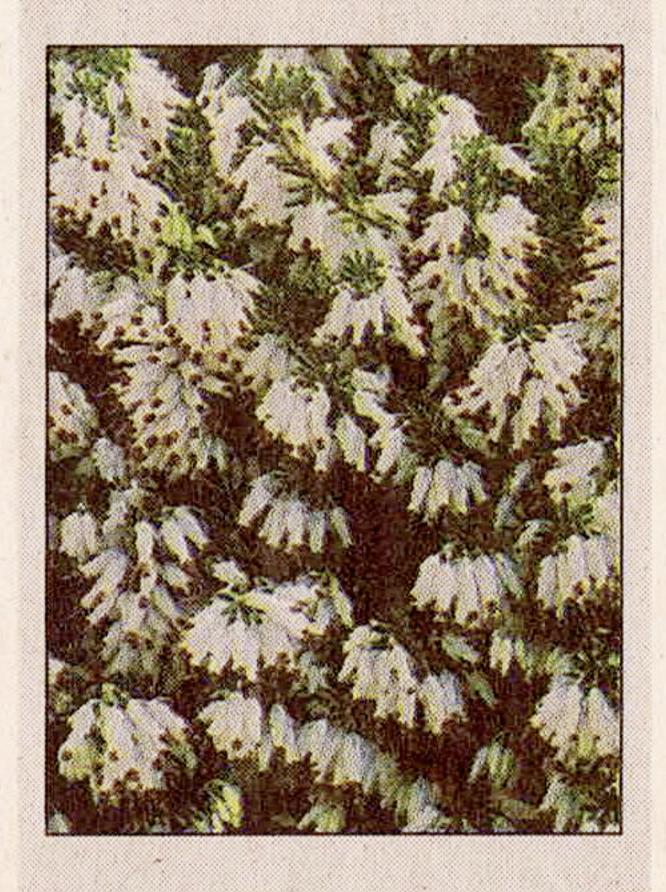


One to have Erica carnea "Springwood

Why?

Charlie Bibby

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