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# DRIVING PASSIONS

Social arbiter and people watcher **Mary Killen** analyses people's relationships with their cars. This month, guerrilla gardener **Richard Reynolds** (below) challenges norms with his 1974 Porsche 914



I like to find the beauty and glamour in something that is usually considered ugly

Along with his fellow volunteers, guerrilla gardener Richard Reynolds transforms London's bleakest traffic islands and wastelands by simply planting and gardening them – purely for love.

'It is much easier to ask for forgiveness afterwards than for permission before,' he says of his activities. 'Just doing it is a demonstration of your commitment. The fact that you are not asking for money and no one is upset by your fait accompli makes things simpler.'

The 30-year-old Oxford graduate is not one to be swayed by popular prejudices. Hence his ownership of the 1974 Porsche 914 – nicknamed the 'people's Porsche' – a co-production with Volkswagen which is disliked by purist Porsche owners. It cost him £4,700 on eBay, and is a two-seater, with what is described in the manual as an 'occasional' seat between. In contrast to most others of the same vintage, which were lurid hippy colours such as tangerine and lime green, Richard's Porsche is one of the few of its kind to be all black, inside and out. 'It is nicely padded,' he says, 'with carpet on the ceiling and soft, leathery-looking seats. It's all plastic though, because by 1974, the idea of leather in a car seemed naff.'

Richard has also recently purchased a flat on the tenth floor of Perronet House, a Seventies concrete tower block overlooking a roundabout in Elephant and Castle. He parks the Porsche in the tower block's echoing, basement

lock-up garage – 'it's amazing to have secure parking in central London for less than £8 a week,' he says.

'When I bought a flat here, I saw the trade-off,' he continues. 'Instead of having some poky little Victorian or Georgian building with a small garden, I was getting a nice, big, light, soundproof flat in a great location with a great view and much more space for my money. I realised I would just have to make the garden around it.'

'Critics say my car looks back to front, but it has a similar aesthetic to Perronet House,' Richard points out. 'It is practical, chunky and utilitarian, without feeling like you are driving around on a motorbike. It has a noisy engine and it is left-hand drive, which can make passengers nervous. But in its handling it is beautifully balanced, and it is amazingly useful for a gardener because it has, effectively, two boots. If you take out the spare wheel, you can lay great trays of primula across and put sacks of wood chippings in the back boot. And you can take the roof off and strap trees to the headrest of the passenger seat. It is a very clever use of space.'

Richard grew up in Devon, the son of a vicar. 'Holidays were always spent in some rented cottage out of the back of the *Church Times*, so my gardening tastes reflect that – waves of colour and cottagey plants.' His lavender beds on a Lambeth traffic island are a testament to this.

When Richard was made redundant from his job in advertising, he used the time to write his book, *On Guerrilla Gardening: A Handbook for Gardening Without Boundaries*, and develop his website. He does not, however, claim to have spearheaded the movement: 'I have found people doing guerrilla gardening all over the world, for various reasons – either to use wasteland more productively as a political gesture or, as in my case, just to beautify things and because they enjoy gardening.' Five thousand people worldwide have signed up to the website as 'sleeper cells'. He met his girlfriend, Lyla Patel, late at night on a traffic island, where both were doing guerrilla gardening.

One man stopped Richard in Elephant and Castle and 'complained that he did not like the *Cornus Alba* I had planted. He wanted me to plant silver birch instead, to which my response was, "Well go and do it then. You are welcome. It is not my flower bed."'

Richard sees similarities between his Porsche, his flat in the concrete block, and the London wastelands

he transforms. 'I like to find the beauty and glamour in something considered ugly. There is something sophisticated about Perronet House – great staircases, great vistas. Porsche owners hate this car; the mortgage brokers say no to my flat; yet to be doing these things purely for their intrinsic value feels good' □

*Guerrilla Gardening:* [www.guerrillagardening.org](http://www.guerrillagardening.org) | For more details about Porsche cars, visit [www.porsche.com](http://www.porsche.com)

