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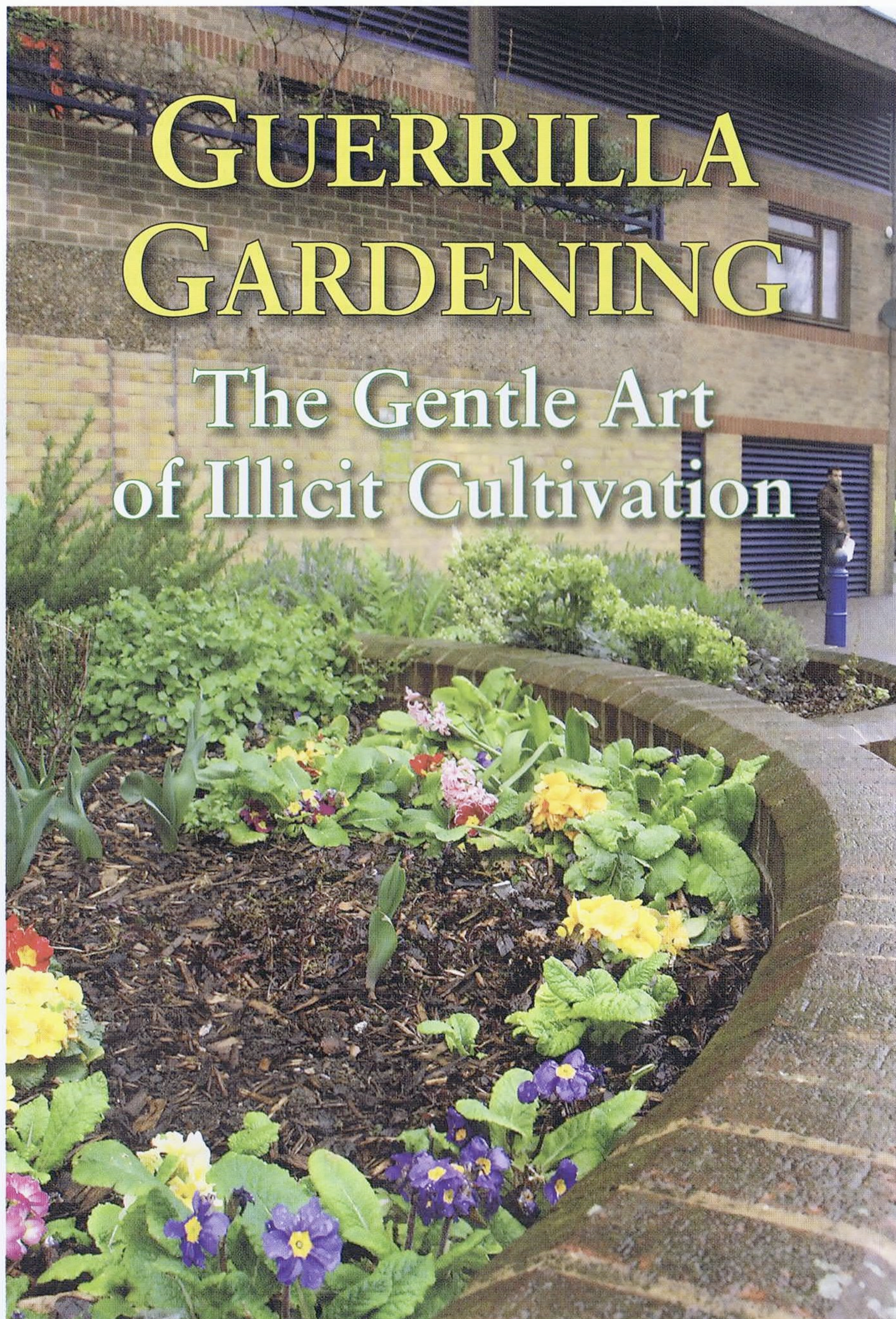
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# GUERRILLA GARDENING

## The Gentle Art of Illicit Cultivation



All photos © Rachel Puddefoot

Rachel Puddefoot describes how the guerrilla gardening movement is blooming in London.

**R**ichard Reynolds is not your average gardener. For a start, he doesn't have a garden. In fact, living high above a busy roundabout in a tower block in central London, he doesn't even have the luxury of a sill to keep a window box on. Yet his work has been nominated for the Southwark in Bloom awards, and won a London's Green Corners award last year.

Reynolds is a guerrilla gardener. He works on land that doesn't belong to him, without permission. It all

started in 2004 when, frustrated with having nowhere of his own to garden, Richard hit upon the idea of working on a 2 x 2 metre bed just outside the front door of his block. Under cover of darkness, he started clearing the neglected area of 'weedy, litter-strewn dead plants, gravel, just absolute rubbish', and reworked it

**Above:** Primulas, bulbs and some bark mulch visually transform these otherwise neglected planters outside a block of flats in London.

into a colourful bed of flowers. He soon progressed to some nearby brick planters and before long, he started to notice other 'orphaned' land in his neighbourhood, which could benefit from similar treatment.

Richard kept an online diary of his activities from the start, and soon like-minded gardeners began to make contact. "Strangers began to get in touch through the website, either telling me what they were doing in their area or saying 'how can I help?'" At which point I realised, this is great, if there are people willing to travel across London for an evening out, doing a bit of gardening, then we can take on even bigger areas." The first major site Richard and his 'troops' tackled was on Westminster Bridge Road, London. Over four nights in two weeks, between 25 and 30 guerrilla gardeners descended on two raised planters of unkempt, litter-strewn grass. They cleared the area, removed the turf, and replaced it with lavender bushes and shrubs.

Soon Richard's website, [www.guerrillagardening.org](http://www.guerrillagardening.org), had become a meeting and planning site for over 2,000 guerrilla gardeners across the globe. Sarah Christie, one of London's active troops, explains why she got

### TOP GUERRILLA GARDENING PLANTS

Sunflowers – bright and easy for children to plant and look after.

Herbs (e.g. lavender, sage, thyme or rosemary) – evergreen and strong smelling.

Herbaceous perennials (e.g. anemones, chrysanthemums) – self sufficient and vigorous.

Shrubs (e.g. *Photinia*, *Pittosporum*, *Euonymus*, azalea, laurels, brooms) – hardy and weather resistant.

Bulbs (e.g. daffodils, tulips, crocuses, bluebells) – really easy, plant them and they look after themselves.

Seeds (e.g. Californian poppy, *nigella*, love in the mist, nasturtiums) – low maintenance, easy to sow.





involved. "Although I have a balcony at home and have been able to grow plants in containers, it is good to be able to work on land that needs more physical work. The land we work on would be lying uncared for otherwise. It's another way to make a difference." Another trooper, Rosie Lee, explains that guerrilla gardening can be beneficial for both site and gardeners: "It has been proven that when areas make an effort with planting, it gives the impression that the area is well cared for, and crime rates drop. And it's good for mental health and destressing." Other guerrillas do it to improve their commute. One gardener in Manchester sprinkles *Mecanopsis cambrica* – yellow poppy seeds – out of the window of his car as he drives along the M62. Some aim to bring some natural colour to the urban sprawl. The 'Sunflower Guerrillas' in Brussels have planted over 17,000 sunflower seeds in the city, and have another 20,000 yet to be planted.

Choosing plants to suit the conditions of the target location is critical. Reynolds explains the thinking behind the lavender now thriving on Westminster Bridge Road. "It's evergreen, it smells nice, it hardly requires watering at all once it's rooted in after a month or two... It attracts butterflies and bumble bees which are endangered it seems these days, and we could get loads of it

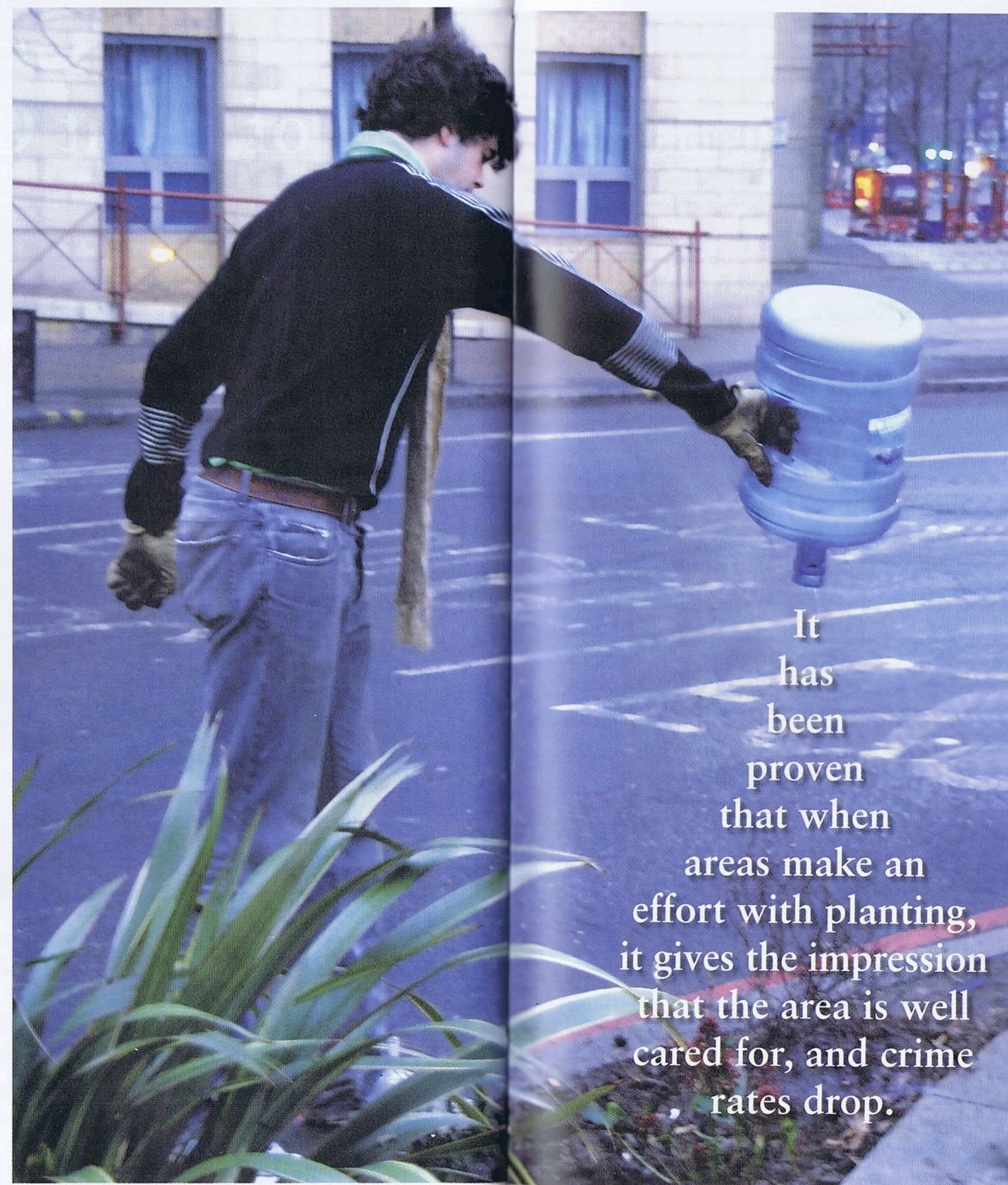
pretty cheaply from a nearby market. Plus it stacks quite well... you can put trays of it on top of each other, which a lot of plants wouldn't forgive you for." Several years later, Richard's troops harvest lavender from the site every summer to fill pillows which are then sold to fund other guerrilla gardening projects.

The real labour of love is maintaining the site after it has been planted. New plants need regular water, and keeping on top of litter can be a constant battle. "Litter is magnetic," says Richard. "The more you leave the more it attracts, because people think it's better to put litter on a flower bed than on the ground."

Before the website became a hub for guerrilla gardening, individuals were funding the work out of their own pockets, but now Richard is being offered donations to aid the cause. "Last week someone emailed me to say, I've got loads of crocus bulbs. Another time I went round to a beautiful house in Notting Hill and loaded a box hedge from a lady who was bored with it and wanted to redesign her back garden. Most of that's ended up in Camden now... A lot of the plants are recycled. I've been given a huge box load of Californian poppy seeds by a horticultural magazine, they bought them for a promotion, the promotion had ended, they couldn't sell them on, so they posted them to me."

#### FOLLOWING DIGGER TRADITION

Guerrilla gardening is targeted, highly organised and meticulously planned, but this is more than just horticultural flash-mobbing (where large groups of people assemble in a predefined area, perform an unusual action for a brief period and then swiftly disperse). Digs are often carried out under cover of darkness and without permission



It has been proven that when areas make an effort with planting, it gives the impression that the area is well cared for, and crime rates drop.

**Top left:** Another planter saved from being a litter strewn mess.

**Centre:** Regular watering and maintenance is required to keep the plants alive.

**Bottom left:** An unwanted Christmas tree awaiting rehoming.

because this attracts the least attention from the authorities, and allows the work to be completed without distraction. The police are rarely concerned once they realise that the guerrillas are tending rather than stealing plants, but Reynolds warns that guerrilla gardening can attract unwanted attention. "Twice now [the police] thought my car was a

guerrilla gardeners when he first stuck a trowel into the little bed outside his home in 2004. In the seventeenth century a textile merchant named Gerrard Winstanley petitioned the King to allow ordinary folk to grow plants on the areas of common land in the kingdom. Winstanley himself was already doing so, along with his band of like-minded men and women who became known as the 'Diggers', possibly the first organised group of guerrilla gardeners in England.

Guerrilla gardeners also struck in New York in 1973. A group called the Green Guerrillas took over a vacant lot and turned it into a community garden, which has since been legitimized and still blooms today. In 1995, hundreds of guerrilla gardeners moved into a derelict site on the banks of the Thames in Wandsworth and occupied it for nearly six months until the authorities closed it down, (as reported in *PM13*.)

Today, there are people illicitly cultivating land all over the world. In San Francisco, an abandoned city farm has been resurrected by guerrilla gardeners, who originally went in with a rotovator to re-generate the seed beds. In Germany, a community garden project was created in Rosa Rose Garden, Kinzigstrasse, Berlin – guerrilla gardeners from far and wide contributed to the project, which was designed to be a meeting

place for the whole neighbourhood. Unfortunately the land was sold earlier this year and the garden has now been destroyed. The guerrilla gardener's fight is often against scarcity of land as well as neglect.

If you fancy guerrilla gardening in your local area, Richard has some tips for getting started. "Start on your own first of all... Perhaps take a friend, but do something really small, as near to your home as possible. Perhaps a tree pit in your street, or a grassy verge at the end of your road. Treat the success of that as a little victory. The confidence that gives you, both in having been able to do it, and then seeing the thing flourish, should encourage you to do more."

"It will also then give you something to point out to people and show them, which is I think one of the most convincing ways of encouraging them to join you, and do something a bit bigger together. They can see your success and the delight that you're getting from it."

*On Guerrilla Gardening – A Handbook for Gardening Without Boundaries*, Richard Reynolds, price £14.99 available from *The Green Shopping Catalogue*.

*Rachel Puddefoot is a freelance writer from Tooting, London. She writes about gardening and green issues amongst other things on her blog: <http://thebigsofa.wordpress.com>*



car bomb, because it was laden with sacks of wood chippings, which they thought was fertiliser. So I was pulled over once on my way to a dig and searched under the Prevention of Terrorism Act."

Although he didn't realise it at the time, Reynolds was following in the boot prints of generations of