

Flower-powered army

JAMES EMMETT

Guerrillas are traditionally armed with guns and bombs. But on the latest urban battlefield, the weapons of choice are the trowel and the spade.

Martin Freeman meets the guerrilla gardeners

IN THE dead of night, Richard Reynolds is going out equipped for crime. He's got some bombs, a bag full of tools and some like-minded criminals for company.

The result will be vandalism – and he is proud of it. And so, crucially, are the people whose neighbourhood Richard and the team are targeting. They will dig what he does.

Richard is armed with a spade and a trowel rather than a brick and a crowbar. He'll be adding colour, not with a spray can but with flowers. The "explosives" are seed bombs, a mix of soil and seeds for hurling into inaccessible areas of urban wasteland.

This is guerrilla gardening and the man most associated with a growing worldwide movement is back on home soil this weekend.

Devonian Richard is in Plymouth to give a talk on cheering up the urban environment at the city's university on Monday and will be helping his mother Janet tend the guerrilla patch she looks after in Stoke.

What was once a sad scrap of unloved and untended land is now a flower bed that brightens up a car park in the city district. Such a transformation of a "forgotten" urban corner – who owned the patch was unclear when the gardeners got stuck in – is typical of what the horticultural heroes achieve.

"Guerrilla gardening is criminal damage, technically," says Richard, 31. "I have never been arrested, but I have been threatened with it. Things got a bit hairy

'It's political in that you are taking responsibility for what is around you'

this week when some police officers loitered rather longer than usual and took my name and address."

But he said the authorities "tend to turn a blind eye".

For Richard, guerrilla gardening started after he moved to London and then into a block of flats just south of the river in Elephant and Castle.

"I didn't have a shared garden or a window box to satisfy the gardening itch," he says. "But all around the council block where I still live there were neglected flower beds.

"We could have just complained, but a couple of other guerrilla gardeners and I decided to be positive, and do something about it."

That doesn't sound terribly British. We're supposed to be a nation of moaners who complain but put up with litter and general urban mess.

In fact guerrilla gardening is British – and it isn't. Richard quotes the example of 17th century socialists The Diggers. Gerard Winstanley started the spade work, leading a group in Cobham, Surrey, who planted vegetables on common land in 1649 – the area was supposed to be for grazing only.

But he credits the modern movement to New Yorkers in the early 1970s, who first used "guerrilla" to describe themselves. "It didn't spread much further than the city because this was long before the Internet," says Richard.

"Other people started doing it but it was sporadic and localised. I started a website and wrote a book and joined it together. I realised there were lots of people out there doing guerrilla gardening."

Now the phenomenon is spreading



Richard Reynolds outside his block of flats in Elephant and Castle, South London



around the world. Guerrilla gardeners are toiling across Europe, in the USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Botswana in southern Africa.

Probably the oldest is 93 and in Devon – Richard's gran, Margot, in Totnes. She is a regular litter-picker on a recreation ground in the town and the pair teamed up to beautify an infrequently tended triangular bed near her home.

Richard developed green fingers when he was growing up in Holsworthy, North Devon, where his father, Michael, is still the rector. He and his two brothers and sister were encouraged to dig in, and at school there was a cultivated patch. He also earned pocket money weeding on an organic strawberry farm near Launceston

when he was a teenager. His self-taught, have-a-go attitude wins favour with communities throughout Britain. He and fellow activists are always eager to involve residents to explain what they are doing and to encourage them to get involved.

In some areas, such as the site of Richard's first foray, Elephant and Castle, officials have done more than turn a blind eye. They have given the guerrilla gardeners permission to continue doing their best.

Not everybody involved in conventional gardening is an admirer, though. TV gardener Monty Don has called the activity "pretty dysfunctional", characterised by "japes and quick-fix" and lacking meaningful engagement. And another horticulture expert lampooned the activity on Radio Four's Gardeners' Question Time.

Richard says: "I am quite upset by that because we always take time to talk to people, tell them what we are doing and get them involved and supportive. Many take the land on.

"It depresses me that gardening has become part of makeover culture, where we are told you have to have experts and hundreds of pounds to do a garden. That puts people off gardening."

The slightly hippy, anarchic vein of the movement isn't restricted to gardening. One activist has taken to targeting potholed roads, others tackle graffiti and litter.

"It is a bit political in that you are taking responsibility for what is around you," says Richard. "It is quite sad how we pay contractors to do manual tasks like clearing and caring for urban land.

"This gets everybody involved with a bit of creativity."

Taking control and transforming something local makes the world's greater problems seem somehow more manageable and "a little less scary", he adds.

Such free-style, low-cost, non-commercial solutions might seem at odds with Richard's job – he works in advertising for VCCP, whose clients include corporate giants Coca-Cola and O2.

But he sees the link as seamless. "It is an advertising solution," he says. "Asking the question, 'how can we make this appealing to get people involved?', not like the old-fashioned Keep-Britain-Tidy, commanding, authoritarian way."

And, as with any campaign – whether advertising or revolutionary – there is a slogan to inspire the troops: "Let's fight the filth with forks and flowers."

■ You can find out what happened when the WMN caught up with some guerrilla gardeners in Plymouth on our website, www.thisiswesternmorningnews.co.uk

● Richard's talk, *Colourful Communities*, is on Monday in the Jill Craigie Lecture Theatre at the University of Plymouth's Roland Levinsky Building from 6-8.30pm. Tickets are £4 (£2 concessions; 01752 300250). The event is organised by Diggin it!, a community organic gardening project in Plymouth run by charity the Routeways Centre www.digginit.org.uk. Learn more about the work done by Richard and others like him at www.guerrillagardening.org. *On Guerrilla Gardening* is published in paperback this month (Bloomsbury, £8.99)



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taking over the streets

JOHN ALLEN

Richard's mother,
Janet Reynolds,
at the site she
maintains in
Plymouth

