Flower-powered army

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

Martin Freeman meets the guerrilla gardeners

IN THE dead of night, Richard Reynolds is going out equipped for war. He’s got some bags, a bag 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 the brick and a bomb. He’ll be adding colour, not with an spray gun, but with bulbs and flowers. The “guerrillas” are planting 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 listened 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 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. Ger-ard Winstanley, in particular, started a spade work, leading a group in Cohaam, Surrey, who planted vegetable plots on a 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,” he says.

“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 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, Margaret, in Tones. She is a regular litter-picker on a recreation ground in the town and the pair teamed up to beautify an inadequately 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 Laurence.
taking over the streets

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