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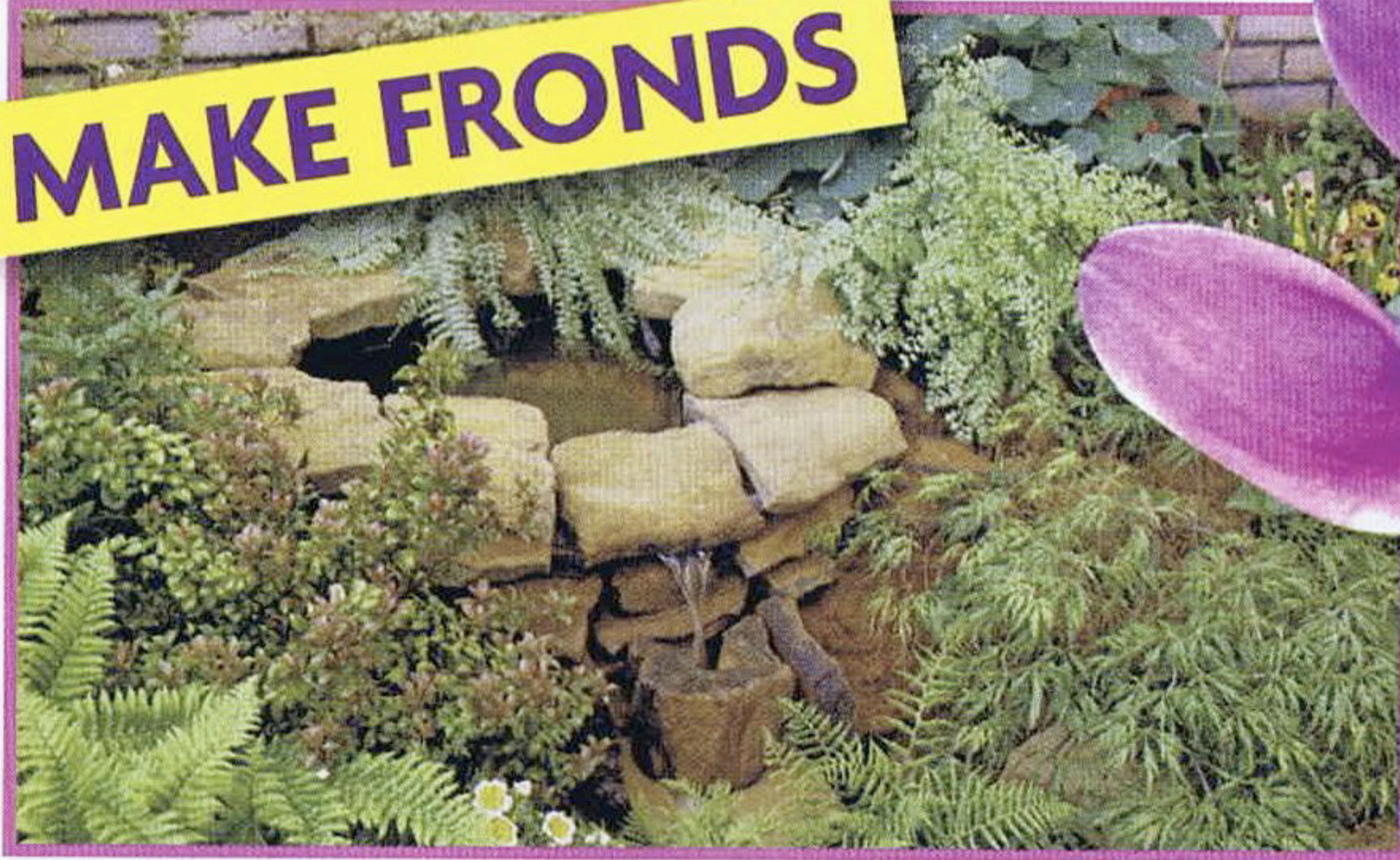
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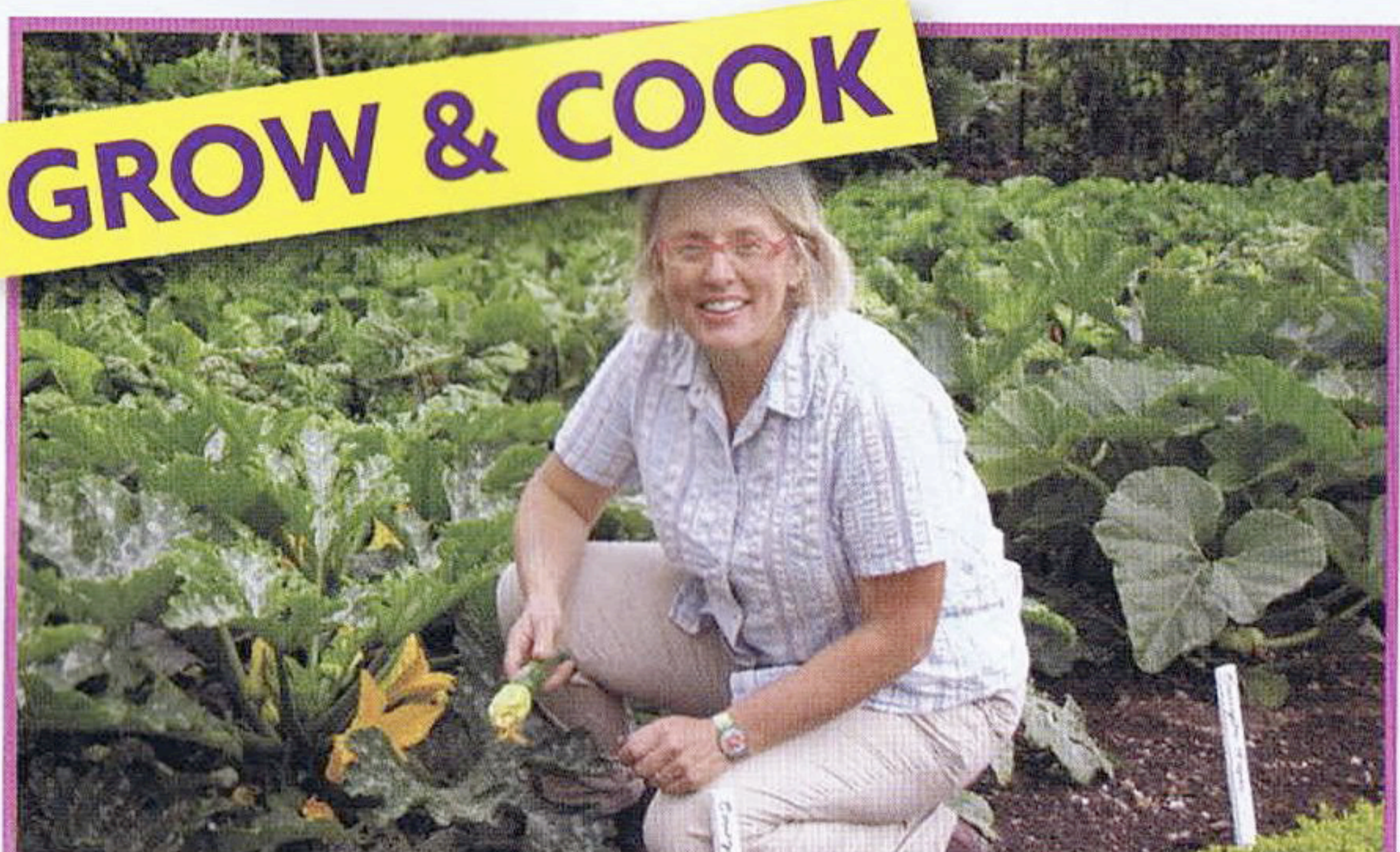
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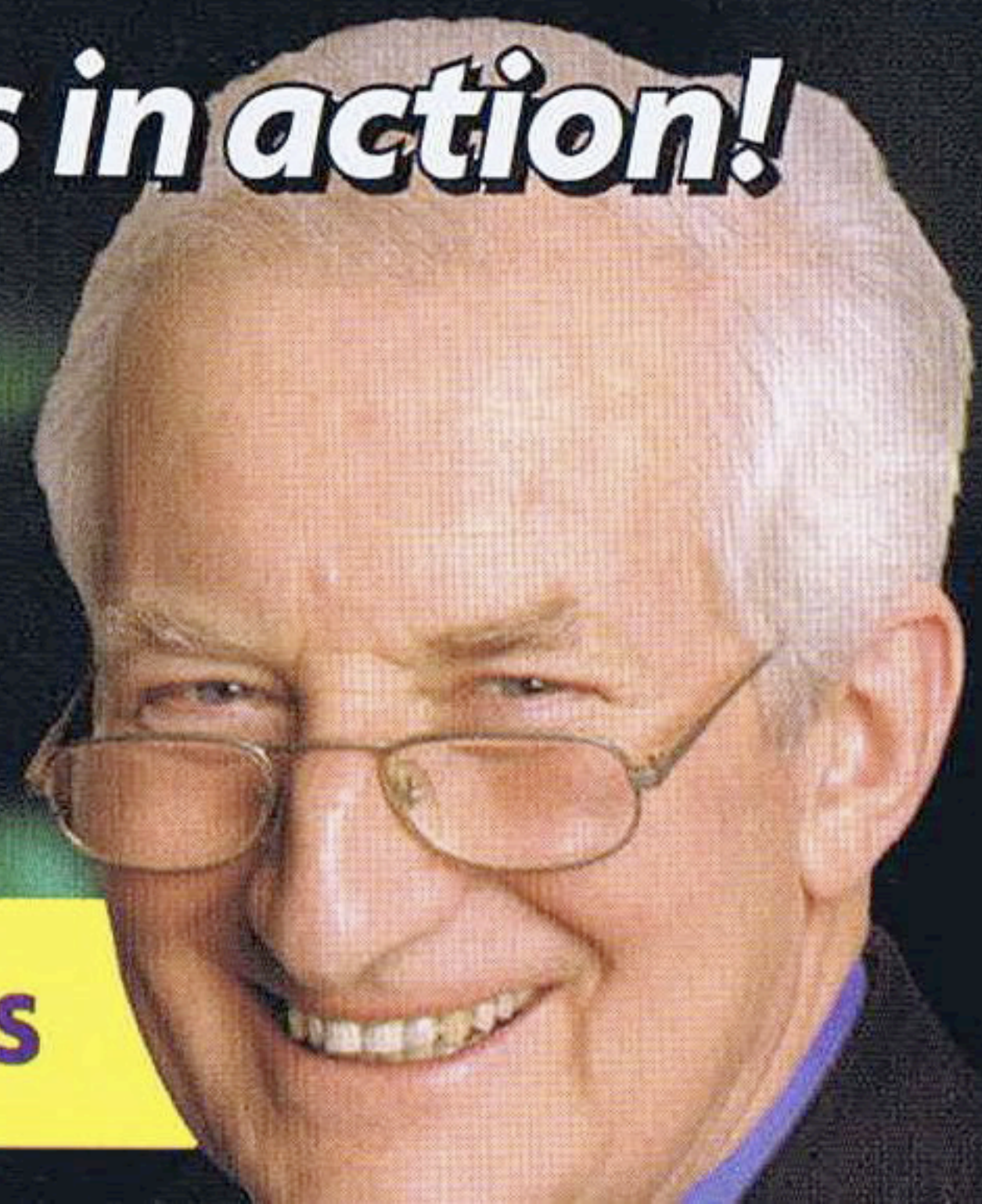
GUERRILLA GARDENING

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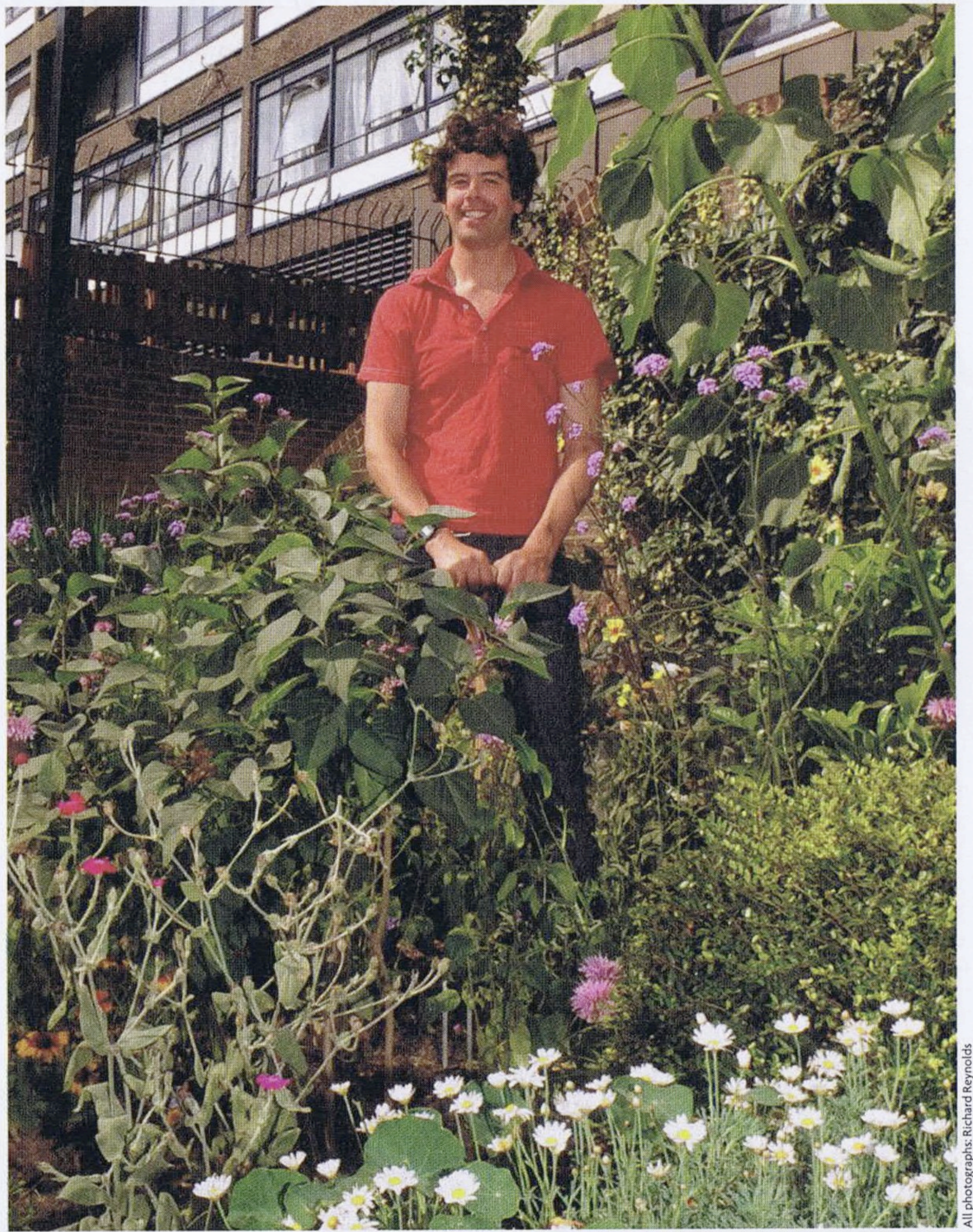


The magic roundabouts



guerrilla GARDENING

One day it's a rubbish-strewn traffic island, the next it's a floral oasis – guerrilla gardeners are transforming our towns. **Rosalind Powell** speaks to the man who started it all in the UK



(left) Guerrilla gardeners often work at night when traffic is lighter and there's less risk of being collared by the Law – although most police officers seem to let them get on with it! (above) Richard Reynolds standing in his four-year-old guerrilla garden, beneath his block of flats Perronet House. Southwark Council told Richard that had he asked for permission before he gardened, he wouldn't have got it

THINK GUERRILLA gardening and images of balaclava-clad rebels sowing seeds with military precision under the cover of darkness spring to mind.

But meeting Richard Reynolds immediately dispels the stereotype. Our rendezvous takes place on a bright, sunny evening on a busy pedestrian crossing in south-east London. It's a triangular island planted with cordylines and lavender bushes, 'Globemaster' alliums, pale purple irises and, bizarrely, cabbages.

Wearing a work uniform of skinny jeans and cashmere jumper, having cycled straight from his job as an advertising executive, Richard quickly gets stuck in, picking up plastic bags and bus tickets, dead leaves, empty beer cans and an abandoned mobile phone. "Can you smell the cordyline?" he asks, inhaling deeply.

The broad definition of guerrilla gardening, a movement which dates

back to 1970s Manhattan, is 'the illicit cultivation of someone else's land'.

"There's this myth going around, spread by gardeners like Monty Don, that guerrilla gardeners are dysfunctional, short-term japesters, completely lacking in community engagement," Richard says. "But I think he's confused."

For Richard, who created his first garden in October 2004 and now works part-time to indulge his hobby the rest of the week, the thrill is in the gardening, rather than the guerrilla side of the operation.

"I want to make the social and physical environment a better place. And I want to get my hands dirty and design it as I want. If it was all about subterfuge then the novelty would wear off pretty quickly. Where are the police? Where's the fight? Who's stopping me now?" He's right – a police car has just driven past with two officers who couldn't have looked less interested. ➤

guerrilla **GARDENING**

◀ “The ‘enemy’ is the apathy of society, the fact that this land is neglected by all of us,” he continues, fluffing up some yellow Californian poppies. “If people really cared about the wasteland in the city we would protest about it.”

“But it’s also quite fun. Gardening in public gives you an excuse to work with a lot of other people, to talk to passers by and to make gardening

bedraggled state of gravel, grass and weeds. It took four nights and 20 volunteers to transform the space, planting low maintenance, hardy perennials that don’t need much watering and are pest-resistant – his general rule for all his gardens – and either donated or bought by Richard. It’s now a regular stop-off point for him on his way to work, when he manages to fit in a bit of light

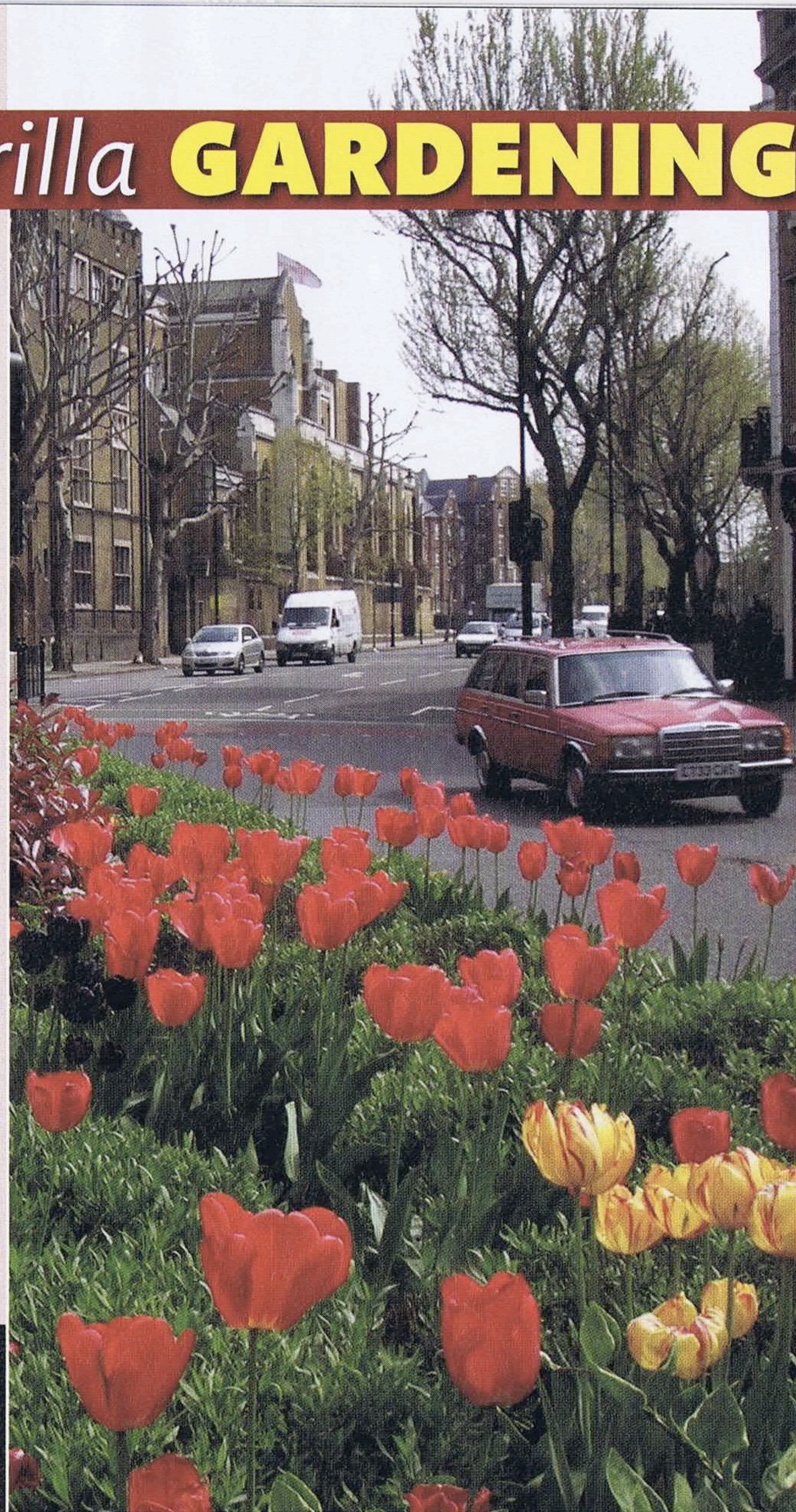
“Do it near to home – don’t expect to build Rome in a day”

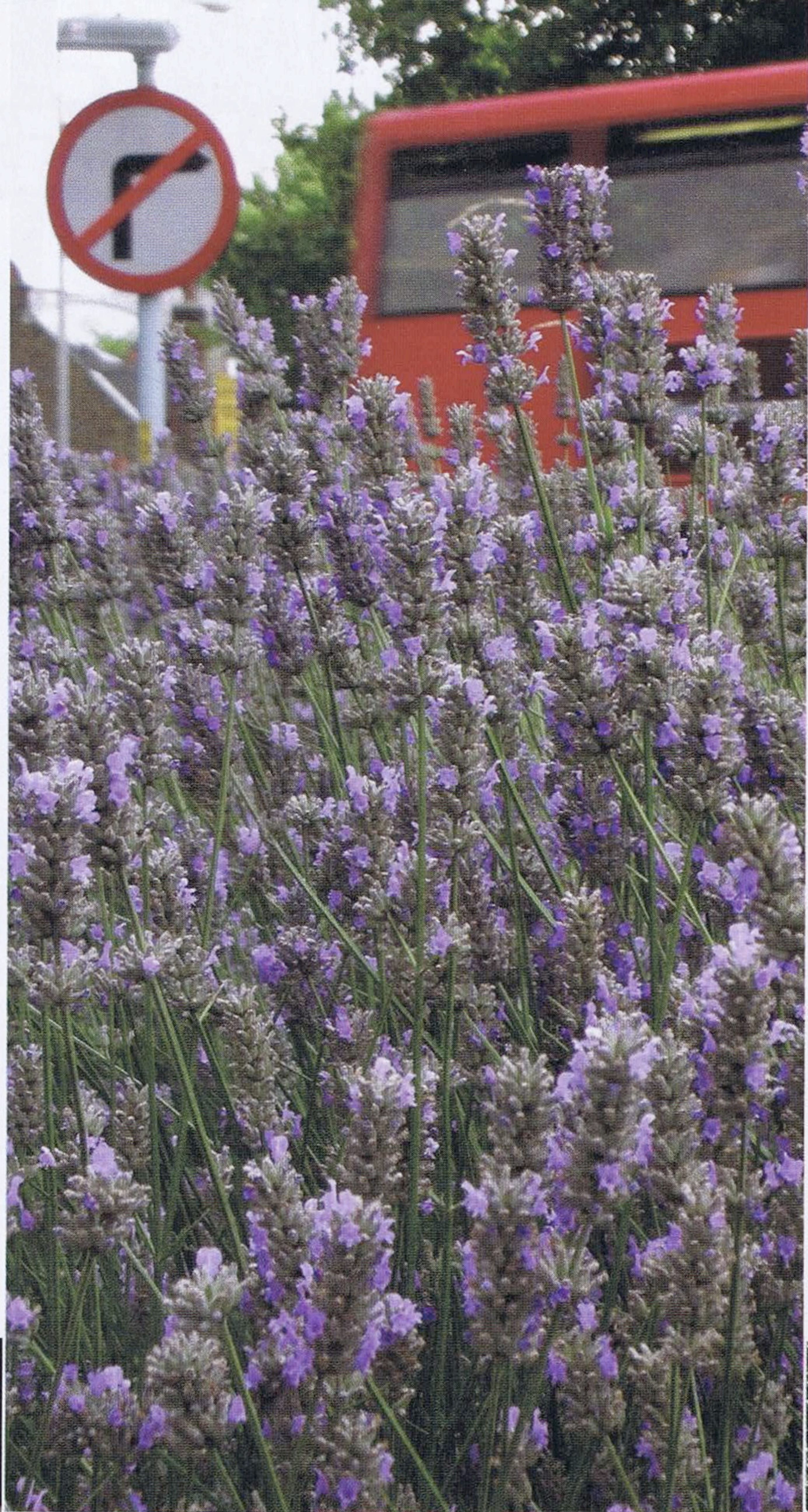
more social. Community gardens generally have a fence and there’s a bit of a ‘club’ atmosphere, whereas here it’s very open.” On cue, his girlfriend, Lyla, appears and they have a quick chat about the tulips. “We met here about three years ago,” he says after she’s left. “The many perks of guerrilla gardening.”

Richard started on this particular plot in March 2006, when it was in a

maintenance, mainly clearing up the debris that regularly gets entangled in the plants. The land is jointly owned by Lambeth and Southwark councils but to date Richard hasn’t heard a peep from either. “Why would they know? The left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing. And as I see it, it’s a win-win situation. We get the pleasure of gardening,” he says, pulling out a ▶

(right) Tulips thrive among the lavender and Photinia in Richard’s largest guerrilla garden, a pair of traffic islands on Westminster Bridge Road, central London (below) People from all walks of life take part – it’s a chance to meet your neighbours!





◀ stubborn weed, “and their job is done. In fact, I’ve had people come up to me and say they’ve written letters of thanks to the council for this wonderful garden.” A bus drives past and toots its horn. “There you go,” he says triumphantly.

The Law

Run-ins with the police have been few and far between, although he got pulled over recently and questioned.

“The normal fear is that we’re stealing something. I’ve had to show them my tub and say, ‘Yes, I’m stealing dandelions,’ and they were like, ‘Oh, okay.’” He’s avoided being arrested on a charge of criminal damage because, “thankfully most of the police use their common sense. I’ve also been told by other police that it would never stand up in court because look at this – where’s the damage?”

We’ve wandered down the road and are now standing outside a tall

tower block on the Elephant and Castle roundabout, possibly one of the ugliest urban landscapes in London, where you have to shout to be heard above the traffic.

We are looking at a beautifully lush garden just outside the block which is more country cottage than urban retreat. With a rich colour scheme of purples, oranges, reds and yellows, there’s a hotch potch of flowers from roses and poppies, foxgloves, snap dragons and hollyhocks to verbena, campanula and daisies.

This, one senses, is Richard’s favourite, where he can flex his creative muscles. It was also his first, which he started in October 2004 shortly after moving into one of the

(left) Lavender blooming on the enormous guerrilla garden on Westminster Bridge Road (below) Californian poppies thrive in a gravelly corner of the same garden



flats where he still lives.

He claims that at the time he hadn't even heard of guerrilla gardening, and only discovered he was one of countless others across the globe when he registered his website. His first gardening missions were, in fact, carried out under the cover of darkness. "I used to start at 2am as I didn't want to meet anyone," he explains. "But as my confidence grew, and there were no letters of complaint from the council, and the plants weren't being stolen, I started going out at times that weren't so exhausting and met my neighbours."

He now has an official agreement with the council that he can maintain the garden – although he's not funded to do so. Over the years he estimates he's spent up to £4000 on all his plots. "But I'm a well-paid advertising executive. Some people spend their money on second homes

"I spend my money on my obsession with gardening"

and foreign holidays, and I spend it on my obsession with gardening."

Moving to an area in desperate need of regeneration has probably been, he says, a blessing. Having grown up in rural Devon, he must have pined for some greenery. "It's physical determination. If I hadn't lived here, I wouldn't be guerrilla gardening. I certainly didn't move here thinking I'd be digging up the roundabouts," he says, as we cross a perilously busy road to inspect some lollo rosso lettuces he's planted in the middle.

Not a job

Given his lifelong passion and commitment to gardening – something he credits his mother and grandmother for encouraging – why has he never considered it as a profession? He looks startled by the suggestion. "I wouldn't find it very stimulating," he says. "I like the intellectual challenge of a job in advertising. I like being around lots of people. I think gardening as a job is generally a solitary activity, even as a team." Nor is he tempted to own a house with a garden. "Why would I want to?" he says. "I can understand it if you have a family or a dog, but I don't need a private outdoor space. In fact, I think it's rather indulgent,"



(inset left) Richard's 'Russian Giant' sunflowers thrive in a narrow central reservation on Denmark Hill, south London
(above) There are always bagfuls of detritus to be collected before the guerrillas can start work on a new project

he says, pulling out one of the lettuces and sniffing it. "Should be fine after a good wash."

Richard is now in demand to help others develop their own – he's recently returned from trips to Hungary and Austria. So what would his advice be to any budding guerrilla gardeners? "Do it near to home, keep it simple – don't expect to build Rome in a day," he says.

"And you have to be an optimist. You have to think you won't get caught, the plants won't get nicked, that it won't be too difficult to look after and that someone else might appreciate it."

Do your bit

WANT TO know more about guerrilla gardening? Richard Reynolds has a website, guerrillagardening.org, with hints, tips and examples of what other guerrilla gardeners have done around the world. Richard has also written a book, *On Guerrilla Gardening*. Normally priced at £8.99, you can get it through AG for £8.50, with free postage. Call (0870) 070 2200 and quote ISBN: 978-0-7475929-76

