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GUERRILLA
GARDENER

Richard Reynolds

Tim Richardson learns how an Exeter choir boy grew up to become Britain's leading guerrilla gardener. Portrait Charlie Hopkinson

Ascending in the lift to the south London flat of Richard Reynolds, the UK's original 'guerrilla gardener', I have a pretty clear conception of the person I am going to meet. In this high-rise eyrie overlooking the huge Elephant and Castle roundabout will lurk a wiry revolutionary clad in combat gear and preparing for a clandestine night-time planting foray. He will be suspicious of the media and in an incandescent state of self-righteous anger over global warming.

I could not have been more wrong. The person who welcomes me into a light-filled, split-level flat on the

Richard's 'troops' do not fit the expected stereotype, either. Typical guerrilla gardeners, he says, are not students or young trendies but otherwise respectable middle-aged people who nurture a mischievous, anti-authoritarian streak and an urge to beautify their surroundings. Often they have been guerrilla gardening a patch of 'orphaned land' (his phrase) for years, without having a way of describing what they are doing.

So how did it all start? Richard moved in to the tower block, Perronet

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top floor of the block is a tousle-haired 31-year-old in a red checked shirt – articulate, thoughtful and well-mannered, as one might expect of a Devon vicar's son educated at public school and Oxford. He was even a chorister at Exeter Cathedral (for goodness' sake), where he started gardening in earnest. "I looked after the boarders' garden at break time instead of kicking a football," he says. "I spent all my money on little boxes of *Lobelia* and *Antirrhinum*. But I got my initial confidence in the garden we had at home at the rectory."

At Oxford Richard lived for a year in the front quad of his college – "In a way my guerrilla gardening started there," he says, recalling the window boxes of busy Lizzies he put outside his window. He then embarked on a career in advertising until he was made redundant in 2006; he now freelances. He passed his Level 2 certificate at the RHS last year.

It is hardly the CV of a horticultural Che Guevara, and

House, in late 2004. The council had taken back control of a series of planting beds in front of the building. "They did nothing," Richard recalls. "I'm not the sort of person to just charge in, but I wanted it done. I went to the garden centre in the afternoon and stocked up with cordylines, cyclamen and lavender, and set the alarm clock for 2am. I didn't want to cause anxiety. I wanted to be invisible."

Richard finds blogging a natural outlet – "I'm keen to evangelise, like my dad in the pulpit" – and that was the key to the campaign, as other 'troops' soon joined him on his 'missions'. He says that the bottom line is that it is great fun – though presumably less so when the police turn up in confrontational mood, as they did on one (filmed) occasion. The transgressive – and often illegal – element is essential and justified, he insists: "I am going against the law by not following standard procedures. But I enjoy gardening and I want to make my local area look better."

The trendiness of the campaign was a bit of a problem at first, he concedes. "I would lead some gardening in a place where people said they needed it – but then they didn't look after it. Nowadays I use lots of people only if it's a big project. Otherwise I just email some regulars. I focus on about six different locations around here where I am the lead gardener. That's how the Green Guerrillas in New York work." That group was formed in 1973, though Richard says he was unaware of it when he started his campaign. Now there are websites devoted to the cause all around the world. But like any good ad-man, Richard says that he feels no ownership of the message once it is 'out there'. He is, however, scathing about those guerrilla gardeners around the world who have 'sold out' and collaborated on television adverts. It transpires that Richard himself has been approached by "three vodka brands, a spreadable cheese, shampoo and crisps" – and said no to them all. Which must take some effort, given the sums involved.

Sunflowers are the signature plant of the guerrilla gardener, along with large areas of lavender. The planting style is not subtle or sophisticated. "That would be inappropriate," Richard says. "It's better to have a quick burst of colour and brightness. Perhaps there is some perspective from advertising there, in that a flower bed can be a little bit like a billboard. People whizzing by can get the message: 'Oh, isn't that nice?' I like people to appreciate it at a simple level." □

• Richard Reynolds' book

On Guerrilla Gardening is published by Bloomsbury and his website is at www.guerrillagardening.org

NEXT MONTH: Graham Gough

