

## ARMED WITH ONLY SECRET NIGHT RAID



▲ IT'S A PLANT! Julie and Richard on the prowl

EXCLUSIVE

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**THE message was hushed and brief. "Bottom of the tower block. 10pm. Wear dark clothes. Bring tools. Tell no one."**

This is the furtive call of the guerrilla gardener, the superhero who is inspiring his secret soldiers to transform public spaces all over the world.

His mission, using good old-fashioned flower power, is to turn every drab roundabout, bare traffic island, shabby flower-bed and patch of empty mud into a blooming spectacle.

Standing in the guerrilla's way are the council jobsworths who say cultivating public land is against the rules. And the police, who claim he's committing criminal damage and could be arrested.

As arranged, I meet the guerrilla after dark at the foot of his high-rise council block in the heart of South London.

By day, he is plain Richard Reynolds, a 30-year-old office worker. But gone now is his briefcase, swapped for his trusty garden trowel.

And he's a little bit on edge.

"I was nearly nicked twice recently," he explains, eyes darting from side to side as he hears a siren in the distance.

"I was tidying up the flower-beds in the roundabout and they stopped and said, 'Would you like to be arrested?' I said, 'No thanks, officers,' and went back

home. But I came out again to finish the work two hours later. The sweet Williams over there look nice, no?"

Four years ago, after moving from Devon to the concrete carbuncle of Elephant and Castle, Richard grew tired of seeing the raised flower-bed at his front door neglected and overgrown.

"I love gardening," he explains. "I missed it since I moved to London and decided I couldn't wait for the council. So I got off my a \* \* e, dug up the flower-bed myself and planted cuttings my mum gave me."

A dark corner that used to reek of urine now ripples with a variety of different colours and wafts with the sweet smell of lavender and sage.

Richard soon recruited friends, family and neighbours. His girlfriend often helps out at night, "otherwise I wouldn't see much of her".

And his influence has spread far beyond South London. Thanks to his website, guerrillagardening.org, groups of night-time gardeners

have sprouted up all over the world. Everyone who enlists is given a troop number. And even Hollywood has got in on the act.

The actress Daryl Hannah tracked Richard down on a recent trip to London and called in to help.

"She came at an hour's notice and came up to the flat on a day when the lifts were broken," says Richard. "She was lovely and wanted to see the work we'd been doing. I couldn't believe it."

"We also saw John Prescott walking along Albert Embankment last week at 11.30pm. He looked a bit stressed, so we ran over and told him what we were doing and gave him some sunflower seeds. I think we cheered him up."

After he started looking after the flower-beds around his tower block Perronet House, Richard lobbied

**YOU CAN DIG IT..**

1. DON'T tackle anything too big, just a manageable patch at a time. Do something obvious with it, like clearing weeds, or cutting a nice edge on a flower-bed, as otherwise council workers might strim over it.
2. PICK an area close to home to ensure you regularly look after it and spot when it needs clearing or pruning.
3. CHOOSE plants that can survive without too much looking after – such as lavender, herby plants, California poppies, Nigella, daffodils, tulips.
4. START on your own, then recruits friends and family as troops. Be optimistic.
5. TAKE before and after photos. If you get into trouble, you can show how shabby the area had been. Technically, cultivating a space could be criminal damage.

STAR HELP  
Daryl Hannah  
with the guerrilla



## A TROWEL AND SOME BEDDING PLANTS, I JOIN A TO LIVE UP A BARREN CONCRETE JUNGLE



▶ GOING TO GROUND  
Richard and Julie at work  
Pictures by  
JAMES VELLACOTT



▶ RESISTANCE IS FERTILE How Richard transformed an empty patch of mud

the council to waive the £35 annual maintenance charge levied at the residents. As a result, they all received a £100 refund. "That's why the old ladies living here are all nice to me," the guerrilla grins.

Plants can be expensive but he points to the yucca plant, donated by a neighbour because it grew too big for the corner of her flat. Then there's the lavender bought with a £15 donation from an American man who emailed: "I used to live in England and loved the smell of lavender. Please plant some for me."

The cala lilies are from his mum's garden in Plymouth. And the tulips and foxgloves were bought at wholesale price from New Covent Garden market.

He urges: "Don't just sit around moaning about the things the council don't do around your neighbourhood. Get out and do it yourself."

"I'd rather the council did things I can't do, like fix the lifts. I'd rather do the gardening myself. I'm not an eco-warrior, I just like nice gardens and want to be left alone to garden peacefully. There's no sadder sight than a paved-over front garden."

"Why spend so much effort cultivating your back garden when no one but you can see it? So many people live in big cities and don't have land of their own, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't be able to garden."

"There's so much public land that can be enjoyed by everyone. Tending it gets you outside, is good exercise and is a great way to meet neighbours. "I used to dream of having a huge

garden. Now I see there's no point. All this public land keeps me busy and I get my rewards just by looking out the window and feeling proud of my work. It's like tagging the landscape with graffiti gardens. I love it when people tell me how much they love it."

Enough chit-chat, time to work. Richard leaps into a large flower-bed near a bus-stop and gets gardening.

He picks up crisp packets and empty drink bottles, snips dead heads off alliums and within seconds shears a wild-looking box hedge into a perfect sphere.

A man in shorts stops in his tracks and gawks at Richard as he swiftly digs a hole to plant a honeysuckle.

He whispers: "Are you the guerrilla gardener? Wow! Mate, great work! I'm going to be planting tulips around Catford this weekend."

He shakes Richard's muddy hand, and walks off with a big grin on his face.

Another man, so drunk he is swaying, blinks and looks

confused as he peers at Richard digging a hole. "Are you burying someone?" he slurs, then staggers off.

It's past midnight by the time Richard downs tools and calls it a night. As he walks back into the block of flats, a neighbour thanks him for re-potting one of his indoor plants.

"Remember it'll need lots of water, so buy an old saucer from a charity shop and use that as a water tray," advises Richard.

And with that, it's time for the guerrilla to hit his own bed.

There's so much public land that can be enjoyed by everyone

# Guerrilla gardener

## NATIONWIDE PLOTS..

**SHEFFIELD** An anonymous Sheffield steel worker has planted montbretia on slag heaps in his lunch break.

**A327, Minley Wood, Hants** Stephen noticed a neglected roundabout near where the body of Milly Dowler was found in 2002.

He dug in a sack of mixed daffodils in 20 frantic minutes to lighten the sombre mood and as a memorial to Milly.

**M42, Worcs** Denise thought that the new motorway embankments of the M42 were dull and she brightened them by planting daffodil bulbs.

**Old Standish Railway Line, Standish, Lancs** David cleared brambles and rubbish from the line and planted shrubs from his own garden.

**St Saviour's, Torre, Devon** Margaret (left) started sneaking around with her secateurs to tidy up the churchyard's ivy. She recruited more troops – and now it will open for an English Heritage Open Day.

**Health centre, Shetland** Without asking permission, Susan cleared thistles and weeds from land around the health centre and planted a thriving array of lupins and trees.

