



Nights at the Circus: Olivia and Andrew tackle a rosemary bush

Herbs, fully loaded: volunteer Claire

Green-fingered guerrilla: Richard Reynolds

FLOWER POWER

All over London, lavender and primulas are unexpectedly blooming in the most inhospitable ground. **Olivia Stewart-Liberty** joins the guerrilla gardeners who are reclaiming the streets for the plants

There is a roundabout a quarter of a mile from Elephant & Castle. It's called St George's Circus, but there's nothing about it to suggest that either St George or indeed a circus was ever here. It is the grim concrete intersection of six South London arterial roads and must be among the most urban places on earth.

Tonight, however – it's almost midnight – the roundabout swarms with people. A girl crouches in a flimsy white skirt to attack the earth with a trowel. Beside her a tall man in a beanie hat is shunting a spade deep into the ground. A model-esque girl is hoeing. Another girl in celebratory red lipstick and smart leather stiletto boots digs vigorously with a fork. Nearby a team gathers debris, lager cans and crisp packets, into a bin liner.

'Lavender is brilliant. Evergreen and extremely hardy,' a voice floats on the frosty air above the

constant roar of traffic. 'It doesn't need a lot of water.' From the darkness a man emerges carrying a lavender plant in each hand. He wears knee-high leather boots and a waisted waxed coat. The boots shine in the orange light from a street lamp as he moves among the workers gathering up empty pots and plastic trays. 'Let's make those trenches a little deeper. Ready for manure over there? Move those primulas in a little. I think they'll last longer. And the rosemary. Great! Let's have it spreading out along the back!' Curls of dark hair lap at his collar and he looks like a highwayman as he strides across six lanes of traffic to fetch canisters of water from the boot of his sleek Seventies Porsche. 'There was a car crash here ten days or so ago,' he returns to tell those on litter detail. 'It was never cleaned up properly.'

This is 28-year-old Richard Reynolds, an advertising executive and the son of a Devon vicar. And this is not London's most glamorous Community Service team; it's guerrilla gardening

in action. Something Reynolds started two years ago. 'I thought I'd invented it,' he says cheerfully as he pauses from emptying a bag of manure into a freshly dug trough. 'But in fact, when I Googled "guerrilla gardening", I found it was everywhere: New York, Toronto. Toronto's full of guerrilla gardeners.'

Reynolds took it up when he moved to his current address, a vast concrete fortress overlooking the roundabout at Elephant & Castle. From his window on the fifth floor, there was not a lot to see in the way of greenery. 'Behind my building, however, were large bare areas. It was just years of litter, broken containers and stringy shrubs. I just thought, "Dammit. I'm going to sort this out." So I set my alarm and got up in the middle of the night.'

And 3am saw Reynolds outside picking up cans and broken glass, digging in manure and rotovating. He planted a lot of cabbage palm. 'They're great for urban areas,' he enthuses. 'They don't need much looking after and the

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results are instant!' He planted hydrangeas, busy lizzies, lavender. He now tends the gardens at the base of his building during daylight hours. 'That was fine until one of my neighbours started telling me where I needed to hoe. That was a bit much.' And the change in the area, has been, says Reynolds, 'huge'. 'You should speak to Joan in number 57. She tells me I've made more difference to this building than anyone else who has ever lived here.'

It's not hard to imagine. Tonight, on this roundabout, Reynolds is a whirlwind of efficiency and energy. Since taking up guerrilla gardening, he's planted in excess of 500 plants in eight areas of London. He prefers to work at night. 'Otherwise you come up against councils and red tape. Plus, I like being a bit secretive about it. I like the idea of people waking up and thinking, "Oh! Who did that?"'

All the plants are donated (by fellow guerrillas; by Andrew, also in advertising, his most loyal sidekick who has bought £70 worth; by his mum – 'whenever I go back to Devon she gives me a box of cuttings and seeds'; by a garden centre: 'it is in the Midlands, though') or paid for by Reynolds himself. Since he started he's spent several hundred pounds on plants. He shrugs. 'Most people like giving something to charity. This is my own bit of philanthropy.'

Two men have arrived on site. 'Who's in charge here?' they ask. A girl with a hoe indicates Reynolds. 'Put us to work,' they tell him. 'What tools have you brought?' asks Reynolds. 'Just our hands and our strong backs,' they tell him. No one laughs. It is a truly wonderful scene and the two men have soon joined me and are digging trenches for the rosemary bushes. A police car stops at the lights. All four of its occupants smile fondly from the windows at the busy guerrilla gardeners. 'The police have

stopped us loads of times,' says Reynolds. 'They just say, "What are you doing?" I say, "Gardening." And they say, "Great."'

Another two people have arrived. They're sliding on brand-new gardening gloves and are removing mint-condition trowels from holdalls. 'Is it all right to put in some parsnips and carrots?' asks 17-year-old Rory, a student at Chelsea College of Art. He'd heard that there was a guerrilla gardening session here tonight as he's a subscriber to Reynolds' website. 'Parsnips? Of course it's all right. I think a vegetable patch is a very good idea. Why not put them in here behind the rosemary?' suggests Reynolds. Rory needs no further prompting and immediately gets to work. 'I'll be back in October to harvest them,' he says. Reynolds smiles. 'I like to think that people will come here' – he looks around at the forbidding buildings and tower blocks surrounding the roundabout – 'and use these herbs for their Sunday lunches.'

The lavender is in, the rosemary is in and the bay trees stand in a smart row. The primulas are up next. 'Lovely,' sighs Reynolds. 'A splash of colour along the front there.' His inspiration, he admits, is Anneka Rice. 'A good bunch of local people working against the clock.' Reynolds looks around him at the 20 or so people hard at work. 'And my other inspiration,' he goes on, 'is Bruce Wayne. As in Batman,' he clarifies. 'The philanthropist.'

And Reynolds in turn would like to inspire people. He would like his 'cell' to become an example for other groups across London – across the country. 'I want to inspire people to take responsibility for the shabby bits in their own neighbourhoods.' And of

course he wants people to join him on his own 'digs'. 'We're always looking for volunteers,' he insists. 'Bring a pair of sturdy gloves and an implement. And, if you can, a donation.'

The primulas are in. And the garden's finished. It's not even an hour since we started work. 'It looks spectacular,' says Reynolds, standing back to examine the finished roundabout. Indeed it does look lovely: a dizzying double row of bright colours set against the dark and light of lavender and rosemary. And, of course, the buried treasure of the parsnips. 'I'm looking forward to seeing it from the bus on my way to work tomorrow,' says Reynolds. Indeed, it turns out that seven of Reynolds' eight plots in London line his bus route to work. It seems he might be less of a philanthropist than perhaps it appeared initially. 'Yes,' he admits. 'I plan to line my entire route to work with flowers. Next up, hanging baskets on Waterloo Bridge.'

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