

Hoodies and hoes



They're a subversive gang on the run from the law, working under cover of darkness, and they're armed – with spades, trowels and pruning shears. Claire Baylis joins the guerrilla gardeners – coming to make a bypass near you beautiful

PHOTOGRAPHS: Peter Guenzel

Kneeling in dirt, doing battle with an achingly stubborn dandelion, I realise I've been weeding for eons, my left foot's gone numb and it *must* be time for a tea break. But maybe a last-orders Absolut – hell, even a hot chocolate – would be more appropriate. It's not mid-afternoon and I'm not Monty Don-ing my back garden. It's nearing midnight and I'm on a roundabout in deepest, darkest 'Sarf' London, surrounded by council blocks and a constant stream of traffic.

Having joined a notorious London-based gang, I am armed with a hoe and dangerous to know – at least if you're a weed, but don't worry if you're a hardy perennial. Welcome to the world of guerrilla gardening...

Earlier that night, 9pm-ish: I arrive at a busy traffic island in Lambeth North to be greeted by Richard Reynolds, 28, an advertising planner and the founder of this movement – a movement that waves manure under the nose of the law by transforming neglected scraps of land. 'It's a bit like a

party,' he smiles, dressed in jeans and trainers, as I scan the area for other hoody-wearing guerrillas bearing hibiscus. 'At first, only a few keen people turn up and you think no one else is coming. But then the crowds start arriving and you start to relax.'

Going green

Stuffing my shiny new gardening gloves out of sight, I try to look suitably 'eco'. But Richard and his crew have more important things to worry about. Will enough guerrillas turn up? Will they get the litter out and shrubs in before the fuzz arrive? Judging by the rate at which Richard's unloading pots of lavender from his classic Porsche, I'm thinking so.

Richard tells me he grew up in Devon in a big house with a big garden and a very green-fingered mother. 'I remember very early on being fascinated watching shrubs she'd planted mature,' he says.

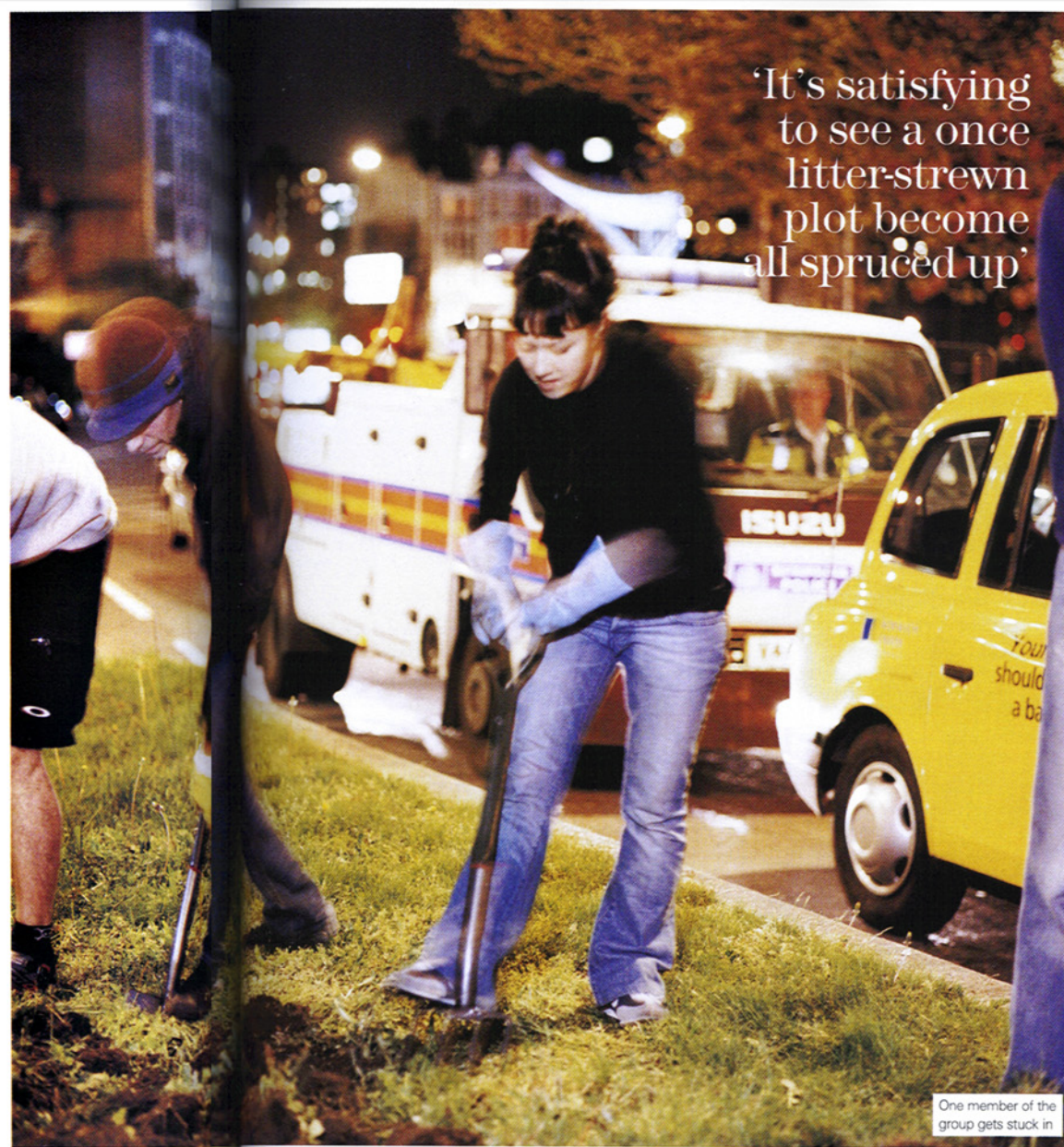
But it was wandering around London's gritty Elephant & Castle nearly two years ago that first lit the guerrilla gardening-shaped lightbulb in his head.

'I moved into this huge tower block right next to the roundabout there and I didn't even have space for a window box. Then I spotted the communal flower beds – they'd been completely neglected – and decided to do something about them,' says Richard.

Knowing he could get into trouble – or maybe even busted – Richard set his alarm for 2am. 'The place was deserted, but I was still really nervous. I dug over the beds, worked in manure, planted cyclamen. It took hours, but it looked fantastic the next morning in daylight.' Within days, he'd set up a website (www.guerrillagardening.org) blogging his 'little project' and encouraging more people to 'turn guerrilla'. The movement now has more than 720 members, with projects springing up everywhere – from London to Upstate New York.

Digging it

Tonight, a group of 20 has congregated to work on the Lambeth North plot, which Richard says is half owned by the council, half by Transport For



'It's satisfying to see a once litter-strewn plot become all spruced up'

One member of the group gets stuck in



Richard prepares for some stealth planting



Alan Titchmarsh, eat your heart out

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS: J. WARREN

'Enough of the "Can I dig it?" jokes...'

London. We're to de-turf, mulch and plant up the last quarter.

Another guerrilla wanders over to say hi. She is 27-year-old Clara Goldsmith, artist manager to Natasha Bedingfield, and has been involved since day one. 'It's really satisfying to see a once litter-strewn plot, full of weeds and dog poo, become all spruced up,' she says. 'We used to put in more flowering plants like pansies to get a more immediate effect, but we've learnt which plants really last in the city.'

The gardening also provides a welcome contrast to her day job: 'My work's pretty stressful. And there are some elements that can feel a bit frivolous, so it's great to be doing something worthwhile, like improving the environment.'

Bending the law

Richard explains that the police are turning a blind eye to what is technically vandalism. 'They'll often stop to ask what we're doing,' he says. 'But I just say we're gardening or doing "voluntary community service", which they seem fine with.'

I see a police car slow at the traffic lights next to the island and momentarily panic. Will the two officers peering out yell 'You're nicked!' before cuffing Richard and confiscating his *Hebe* 'Caledonia'? But it drives off without so much as the wag of a finger. Probably got more dangerous criminals to catch.

For Alex, 33, who works in personnel for an international charity, the air of illegality does add a certain frisson to the experience. But there's more to it than that. 'My job is all about helping people on a global scale,' she says. 'It's great to be doing something for the community at a local level.'

Making friends

Lambeth Council's take, while not exactly supportive, appears far from irate: 'We understand people's desire to help beautify the borough,' says a spokesperson, 'but we would prefer people to work with us in a more structured way, through the normal channels.' Transport For London, meanwhile, says it is unable to comment. >



The power of green: what every tower block needs

While some projects cost almost nothing, a bigger mission like tonight's needs a cash injection of between £300 and £400. Richard tells me he regularly donates his own money to the cause, with the rest of the work completed thanks to online donations – of money, seeds and plants. Tonight the guerrillas are using a huge box of gardening tools contributed by a shop in London's Columbia Road Flower Market.

Passers-by seem genuinely touched by the guerrilla activities, the entire night's graft boosted by horn-beeping and yells of encouragement. One bloke, keen to help, hands Richard a tenner but declares his pristine outfit a no-hoe zone. Another's determined to get down and dirty but, judging by the super-sized bottle of cider he's wielding, isn't capable of walking, let alone weeding, in a straight line.

Thirty-three-year-old Shifali, who works in the City, is gardening, tonight, but says she's already hooked. 'What's the alternative?' she asks with a shrug. 'Sitting in front of the TV? Here you're outside and getting exercise without paying for gym

membership. I'm going to persuade my friends to come with me next time.' Pam, 29, a management consultant, adds that it's a brilliant way to expand your social circle. 'Lots of people complain that London isn't friendly, but you create your own community,' she says. 'The more you give, the more you get out. This is a great way to meet people, and if you make the city a bit greener, it might even cheer everyone up, too.'

First London – next, the world!

Residents are nothing if not appreciative. Martin Endicott lives on St George's Road, just around the corner; his flat overlooks the plot. 'I knew they were up to something,' he says admiringly. 'Then I saw the flowerbeds in the morning. They were looking so tatty before, but are fantastic now. They're trying to enhance the quality of the area and I think that's just great.'

For now, Richard's working from project to project – the next one's in Stratford, East London. But with membership and media interest growing, he's thinking big in the

long-term, keen for members to continue setting up 'guerrilla cells' across the country and abroad. 'There are so many areas that could be improved,' he says. 'I've spotted a *huge* area by Blackfriars Bridge. Then there's the M40 embankment – imagine *that* covered in tulips. It'd be quite an adventure, meeting up in a service station and doing a great mass of planting.'

Lam: Richard's focus on tonight's task is admirable but, as with the best of parties, people have begun to drift off: only the hardcore remain. Before I, too, bail out, Richard fills me in on the one bit of action I missed tonight. It seems I was still busily weeding when a small white van pulled up at the traffic lights, emblazoned with a big fat Cleaning Up Lambeth logo. 'The guy looked so embarrassed, like we were really going to lay into him,' laughs Richard. 'And when I did ask if he'd like to help, he yelled, "Yes, I'll just park the van", then sped off. Wonderful! If the authorities are actually on the run from us, that's just perfect.' □

For more information, to sign up or make a donation to the cause, please visit www.guerrillagardening.org.



It's a roundabout... only prettier!

Other ways to go green

(without getting nicked!)

Get sapling-savvy

Trees For Cities is an independent charity that plants trees and re-landscapes public spaces in urban areas. The charity aims to greenify cities, counter global warming and unite communities. Sponsor trees, volunteer at a community planting event or run the 'Tree-Athlon' in Battersea Park on the 23rd September (and Birmingham early October). Visit www.treesforcities.org or call 0207 587 1320 for more info.

Make a roof garden

Help combat global warming by turning your rooftop into a living oasis. Visit www.livingroofs.org – an independent, non-profit organisation that lists the environmental benefits of swapping tiles for the ultimate compact and bijoux 'meadow with views'.

Turn twitcher

Volunteer with the RSPB and you could spend 48 hours planting reeds and monitoring birds, squirrels and deer. Too OTT? Then make some changes at home: let a section of lawn grow wild, attracting insects to feed the birds. Or pop in a wildlife pond: even a 4ft by 3ft one will house newts, frogs and dragonfly (if you skip the goldfish). Visit www.rspb.org or call 01767 680 551.

Make your garden a hedgehog magnet

If you have a garden, maximize its environmental potential. Simple things like introducing natural predators (we're talking ladybirds, not Labradors), making your own compost and leaving a small pile of logs to house the local hedgehogs make a difference. Visit www.english-nature.org.uk and click on the 'Nature in the garden' link, or call 01733 455101 for more tips.