

WATCH OUT! WE ARE GUERRILLAS – AND WE'RE ARMED

... with lots of compost, a dibber and some very nice red flowers

By **Tony Saint**

All was quiet in the heart of the city as I pulled up at the agreed rendezvous and turned off the car's engine. I picked up the mysterious message I had been sent, scrutinising it once more to make sure I was in the right place.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a figure appeared and gave a sharp rap on the window. He looked at me carefully as I wound down the window.

'You the guy from the paper?' he demanded.

'Yeah,' I replied, trying to play it cool. He looked around furtively. 'You got the stuff?'

I got out and moved nervously to the back of the car, closely followed by the agitated stranger. At the sight of the contents of the boot, he couldn't suppress an excited hiss of breath.

'It's all there,' I told him. 'Five bags.' He smiled, then broke the night silence with a shrill wolf whistle. From behind a wall, three figures emerged, carrying what looked like weapons. They stopped a few feet away.

'He's brought the compost,' he told them.

A man thrust one of the weapons at me. It was a spade. 'You're in,' he said. 'Let's go to work.' It was time to start guerrilla gardening.

So how was it that I found myself digging and hoeing in the middle of the night with a secretive sect of horticultural activists? I had heard whispered rumours of an anonymous gardener who had taken it upon himself to venture out after dark and improve small, neglected plots of land amid London's urban sprawl.

Having stumbled across his website – www.guerrillagardening.org – I'd sent him a message asking if I could join one of the nocturnal jaunts. I received an e-mailed reply giving a time, date, location and no-nonsense request for 300 litres of composted matter – proof of my commitment.

The beneficiaries of our labour were to be the residents of Charles Allen House, a modern, uninspiring building in North London sporting two long, narrow plant beds where it adjoined the street. Crammed with empty cans, cigarette packets and weeds, they certainly were in dire need of care.

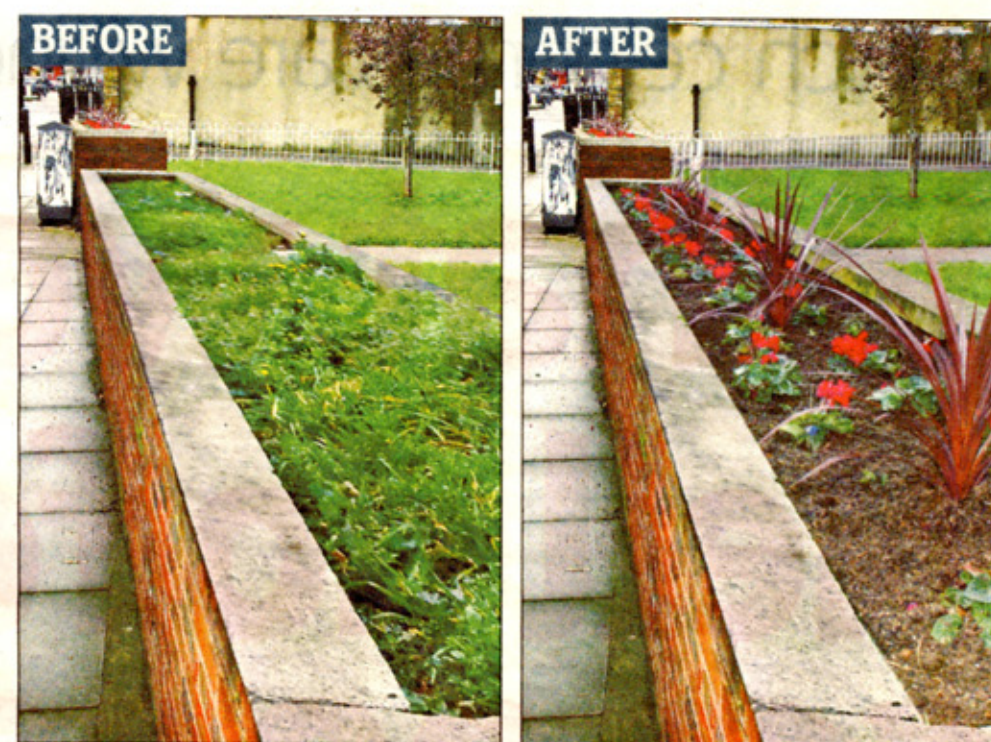
'I've been monitoring this site for about two months and it looks perpetually neglected,' the activist told me, adding that reconnaissance was paramount, 'as in any guerrilla war'.

Despite the cloak-and-dagger stuff, we bonded over our garden forks and were soon on first-name terms. I can reveal the identity of the Guerrilla Gardener is Richard Reynolds, an amiable and well-spoken 28-year-old. His friends Clara, Joe and Andrew made up the rest of the team and we got to work with enthusiasm, forking out hundreds of weeds.

Richard, I learnt, lives in a tower block in one of London's most heavily urbanised areas but comes from rural



Digging for victory... Richard Reynolds, centre, with Tony, second from right, Clara, Joe and Andrew



Flower power... Weeds and litter are replaced with cyclamen and cabbage palms

Devon, where he developed his love for cultivating plants. But his day job gives him no scope to pursue his passion. 'I work in an office, where we pay someone to look after the pot plants, so I don't even get that thrill.' He stops working for a moment to look up dreamily. 'I just look out of the window, imagining window boxes all along the Westway.'

It would have been easy to assume Richard was a few shrubs short of a herbaceous border, but talking to him for even a short time, it's obvious that his enthusiasm is deeply felt.

'I was head gardener at school. While everyone was kicking a football around, I was planting tomatoes and bedding plants. I was awarded a trowel which a few years later my dad

We've almost finished digging the flower beds when a police van slows to a halt alongside us...

used to stir paint with. It was ruined.' He smarts at the memory.

Perhaps this incident explains why Richard associates gardening with rebellion. And there's no doubt that there's an anti-Establishment element to his style of husbandry.

Guerrilla gardening originated in America, as a whimsical offshoot of the anti-globalisation movement. Richard thinks it has a particular pertinence to the British. 'There's something a bit selfish about gardening here. We have our little fences and our separate plots. I like to do a bit of gardening that everybody can share, and there's nothing more open than planting a spruce in the middle of a round-

about.' And he's not the only one. 'There are little cells across the country doing the same thing. They may not call themselves guerrilla gardeners but that's what they're doing.'

But this kind of activity can get you into trouble, as Malcolm Everton found out. Unhappy with the state of the communal areas of his sheltered housing project in Oxford, Mr Everton began weeding, planting and tending hanging baskets. His reward was a banning order from his local council's Crime and Nuisance Unit.

It seems that, whatever the benefit to the local community, guerrilla gardening takes place in a legal grey area, one of the reasons why it is best done under cover. 'It's a bit sneaky, although that comes with the risks of its own. Andrew described the last dig he had been on, in a notoriously dodgy part of town. 'We were happily cultivating away while all sorts of people were up to no good around us. We saw a couple of fights and a few blokes getting chased.'

Doing it while the city sleeps undoubtedly adds a frisson of excitement, but Richard says there are practical reasons. 'The fewer people around the better – I was foolish enough to go out one day to water some plants I'd put in a few weeks earlier. I carried the water in some petrol cans. A council van passed by, saw me pouring water out of a petrol can and made the obvious assumption that I was going to set fire to them.'

With all the weeds removed on our plot, we began to turn the earth over. Richard purred over the quality of the soil, informing me of its nutritional qualities with a sense of excitement you might associate with the appreciation of an exceptional bottle of wine.

As we worked, I couldn't help but notice a few curtains twitching in the building behind us. Then, as we added my bags of compost to the planters, a middle-aged woman approached us.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

'Gardening,' said Richard breezily, hardly bothering to look up.

She nodded and turned back, face creased with a question. 'What for?'

'To make it look nicer.'

'Oh, right. Well, that's nice. Nice to see a bit of colour.'

I asked her how long it had been

since anyone had 'er ded to them. 'Oooh, years,' she said.

After about an hour of intensive weeding and tilling, we had reached the planting stage. Richard opened the boot of his sports car to reveal a riot of red. 'Cyclamen,' he told me, handing out trays to each of us in turn. 'Excellent colour during the winter. Flowers until April and will come back next November.' These were to be added to a dozen or so cordyline or cabbage palms that display bold leaves all year round and will eventually grow 10ft tall.

But as our project neared its end, trouble loomed. A police van slowed to a halt alongside us and a female officer leant out, lips pursed. 'Everything all right here?' she asked, as if we might somehow be out here planting hardy annuals against our will.

'Fine, officer,' said Richard, leaning rakishly on a hoe. 'Just a spot of voluntary community service.'

The two coppers shared a look. 'Very impressive,' muttered the woman's male colleague. If there was an offence being committed, they couldn't remember it or be bothered to enforce it. With that, they were gone, their departure met with a palpable sense of relief.

It was almost with a celebratory air that we thrust the plants into their new home. Standing back as we finished, we had no option but to be impressed by the transformation and I had an insight into the satisfaction that the guerrilla gardeners get.

For just £140, we had turned a miserable and depressing eyesore into a pleasing and attractive feature of the local environment that would last for years if tended properly.

But there was one thing still troubling me. Would the Guerrilla Gardener's sense of community spirit be matched by the very people on whom he had spent his own time and money trying to help? Or would I pass by at some time in the future and see that our hard work had been for naught?

Then, as I got back into my car, raindrops started to trail down the windscreen. Within a few moments, the heavens had opened. Maybe, I mused as I drove off into the night, the Guerrilla Gardener has greater forces working on his side.