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meals, Bob Flowerdew's  
allotment tips and  
Dan Pearson's top trees

# The avant-gardeners

From flower-powered hit squads sprucing up our city squares in the small hours to the Kew gardener who thinks like a tree, **Lucy Siegle** meets five forward-thinking gardeners breaking new ground. Portraits **Sophia Evans**, **Murdo MacLeod** and **Karen Robinson**

## RICHARD REYNOLDS GUERRILLA GARDENER

What he does Masterminds covert, urban planting operations in the dead of night to beautify neglected municipal flowerbeds

Three years ago, 29-year-old Richard Reynolds looked down from his new flat in Elephant and Castle, south London, and instead of seeing neglected municipal flowerbeds full of Dr Pepper cans, crisp packets and condoms, he saw potential. So he began sneaking down the stairwell at 2am and planting lavender.

'With hindsight it was insane and quite unnecessary to garden in the middle of the night,' he admits, 'but I was scared that my neighbours wouldn't like the idea, and technically the flowerbeds belong to Southwark council.' (Luckily, the authorities tend to turn a blind eye.) 'It was thrilling,' Reynolds says, 'because something magical happened to Elephant and Castle in the night, more carbon friendly than spray-painting graffiti.'

For a month he thought he'd invented guerrilla gardening, but digging a little deeper he discovered the roots of stealth tilling went way back to Gerard Winstanley, grandfather of the Digger movement in the 1640s, and stretched to Seventies New Yorkers who annexed car parks for inner-city parks, and even the UK's anti-capitalist scene.

Not that Reynolds identifies with everybody:

'Putting a piece of turf on Churchill's head [anti-capitalists decorated his statue in Parliament Square in 2000] isn't guerrilla gardening,' protests Reynolds. 'In fact, it isn't even gardening.' By contrast, he is all about long-term guerrilla gardening, quality planting, inventiveness and the upkeep of sites rather than stunts. So far he's got 25 different covert London projects under his belt. The only time a bed was vandalised was when, by his own admission, he tried to be 'too showy and planted primulas'. How did he feel when he found them ripped up and his pots smashed? 'Er, like Percy Thrower when the *Blue Peter* garden was vandalised.' But he concedes this is all about challenges: 'When we plant we have to think about bus exhaust fumes which scorch plants, litter louts and cycle couriers taking short cuts – we're not just dealing with slugs and next door's cat.'

**Try this at home** Start simply with a corner rather than a huge area. Buy a fork and scratch over the area and spread something easy, such as Californian poppies. Be portable. Carry big, robust seeds such as nasturtiums with you, and a water bottle, so that you can water regularly. Plant some violets. To the uninitiated they look a bit like weeds and are less likely to be vandalised. Find many other useful tips at [www.guerrillagardening.org](http://www.guerrillagardening.org)



Red-handed: Richard Reynolds at a guerrilla gardening site in Elephant and Castle, south London