

rise

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**Secret
gardening**
RICHARD REYNOLDS DIGS IN

THE LIFE AQUATIC
FASHION JOURNEYS UNDER THE SEA

horticulture

'ALL GARDENING IS landscape painting'. So proclaimed William Kent, the 17th century English architect and one of the pioneers of the English landscaped garden. Happily, 400 years or so on, this attitude continues to thrive in the somewhat unlikely urban sprawl that constitutes Elephant and Castle. A visit to the concrete jungle may not seem like the obvious place to go to sate an avid horticultural appetite, but it has something Kew Gardens cannot boast – its very own guerrilla gardener. Twenty-eight year old Richard Reynolds lives in Elephant and Castle and describes the communal gardens in his own tower block as being 'a complete mess' when he moved in. While half-hearted attempts had been made to create grassy areas and places for plants around the building, many of these plans had fallen sadly by the wayside and into disarray. However, rather than simply bemoan the lack of care, Richard was inspired to arm himself with a trowel and take matters into his own hands.

Until recently, Richard worked full-time in advertising but the original guerrilla gardener decided to eschew the media for pursuits of an altogether more visionary nature. It was a view from the window of his own pleasant pied-a-terre



of the streets and traffic below, the centre piece of which is the infamous Elephant and Castle roundabout, that kick-started his remarkable change of direction. The epitome of traffic-choked urban living, it was Richard's frustration with the sad lack of plant-life here that catalysed his grand scale mission to transform London's urban wastelands into a series of beautiful gardens. 'I'd been to one of the residents' association meetings, just to find out what was going on, but it all seemed terribly complicated,' he explains. 'Much simpler for me to go off to the garden centre, load up the car with plants, set the alarm clock for the middle of the night and do it myself.'

Amiable and well-spoken, Richard is charmingly eccentric and affable. Initially alone in his ambitious undertaking, he began to garden by night to avoid unwanted attention from the authorities; as the plants began to grow so interest gathered accordingly in his self-delegated assignment. 'I didn't know this at the time, but people had exactly the same irritation I had with the grotty public space,' he says. 'Friends were interested in what I was doing and wanted to come along, which enabled me to take on bigger projects.' And so the

natural progression was for Richard to found the Guerrilla Gardeners, an organisation dedicated solely to improving public space through gardening. There are now some 850 people signed up on Richard's website, 50 of whom regularly volunteer to join him on his night time excursions to unloved and unlovely pockets of the city. This unprecedented level of support spurred him on. 'I ventured further afield to roundabouts, traffic islands and different areas. I got more confident... People did come up to me, of course, and they'd all ask "who's paying for this?" and I'd say, "I'm doing it." They were amazed – they all assumed I was employed by the council or the housing association or doing community service.'

Strictly speaking Guerrilla Gardening is not sanctioned by the authorities, but so far they have turned a sympathetic blind eye to Richard's work. 'I think if it's done in a responsible way then it's good for everybody,' he says. 'It also saves them [the council] a lot of money.' The police once approached Richard and asked what he was doing. 'Gardening,' was his frank and honest response. 'They looked bemused and then drove off,' he laughs. A guerrilla gardener in Oxford (Malcolm Everton) has had less luck with the law.



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Malcolm was issued with a warning from the police for putting up hanging baskets and mowing the communal lawns. Richard feels strongly that this officious reaction to a free and altruistic display of public-spiritedness is 'ridiculous.' He appeared on Oxford's local radio station to lend his support to Malcolm, as well as branding Oxford as 'enemy territory' on his website. This kind of exposure means Richard is now an eminent figure in the tower block where he lives. While his neighbours may not all know

him by name, they recognise him at least as 'the man who does the gardening.' Richard recalls how occasionally his good deeds have been slightly misinterpreted by neighbours who assume that he is always on hand to tackle any horticultural quandary; he mimics (in good humour) one in particular who has begun to accost him with requests such as 'Oh Richard, there are some yucca plants in the lobby, could you prune them?' He is typically gracious and philosophical in his reaction: 'I felt a little annoyed by that', he smiles. 'But at least he was taking an interest.'

Following an interview on Radio 4, Richard has appeared in myriad newspapers, magazines and on ITV's *This Morning* programme. 'Each time something is published more people get in touch,' he says. '[They] tell me what they're doing, send me money and say "I'd like to come along and help you."' By the end of last year, Richard had spent £700 of his own money on plants and equipment, but has also received numerous donations from the general public. 'I still find it brilliant and heart-warming that complete strangers can give me money to continue my work,' he says.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN WARREN, WWW.JWARREN.CO.UK

LABOUR OF LOVE

In protest to inner-city grottness, former advertising hotshot Richard Reynolds was inspired to give it all up and devote himself to making neglected areas of the city into greener, cleaner and prettier places. The original Guerilla Gardener talks to Sally J Stott about his first love: gardening.



not immune to this. But ever true to the Guerrilla Gardening spirit, Richard has posted a note on his website asking for people to come up with innovative solutions to the problem. Cactuses seem likely to be involved, he hints cryptically.

Gardening is an activity Richard feels can be fitted into most lifestyles. 'It's a choice between, do you go to the pub or the cinema or do you do some gardening?' He stresses that Guerrilla Gardening does not have to be large scale. 'I know people who simply mow a patch of lawn

that is beyond their garden, that strictly speaking isn't their responsibility. Now that's Guerrilla Gardening. There's a man who plants daffodils in Yorkshire, whilst cycling round the country lanes. That's Guerrilla Gardening as well. He's got the same motivation as me – simply wanting public spaces to look more attractive.'

Richard's mission now is to build the numbers of people involved in the Guerrilla Gardening movement. 'My aim is to continue spreading the word to whoever wants to listen to me,' he says

humbly. 'I've got my patches of garden, I want to carry on looking after them, make them as good as possible and encourage more people to do the same.' The writer Penelope Lively once said wistfully, 'I'd like to have been one of those gardeners who change the gardening habits of the nation for decades, like Gertrude Jekyll.' In Richard Reynolds, we may just have found that very thing: a horticultural innovator for the 21st Century.

www.guerrillagardening.org