

The guerilla gardeners – urban heroes or silly sods?

Kelvin Chan in London

The mission briefing from the guerilla leader was concise and simple: rendezvous at the intersection of Westminster Bridge Road and St George's Road in south London at precisely 8pm on Tuesday evening.

When the dozen men and women dedicated to the cause had assembled, they would attack with their long-handled weapons. It was unspoken, but understood, that it would be a messy job and take several hours.

But the guerillas didn't mind. They were volunteers dedicated to liberation. In this case, the target was a neglected traffic island overgrown with weeds which they planned to free from ugliness.

Britain's guerilla gardeners are led by Richard Reynolds, a 28-year-old marketing executive with an intense devotion to horticulture and a desire to beautify rundown public areas. Mr Reynolds said he started his group 18 months ago with

friends. Since then it has grown, thanks to word of mouth and a few mentions in local media. He now has 600 subscribers on his mailing list and a willing pool of 30 to 40 volunteers, as well as interest from abroad.

Mr Reynolds said he started his resistance movement when he moved into the Elephant and Castle district of London, a notoriously run-down area that is home to a massive public housing estate and an ugly shopping centre.

"I moved to Elephant and Castle, which is good for having big flats for not a lot of money but it's not a very attractive area. There's a lot of public space that is not kept up immediately outside the tower block," he said.

"It seemed like the sensible thing to do. Instead of going to the council or trying to get grants, why not do it yourself?" he said. For his first project, in October 2004, he bought some plants during the day and, because he was so nervous, went out at 2am to garden.

"Afterwards, I felt like a guerilla," he said. And so, a movement was born. Since then, Mr Reynolds and other like-minded people have worked on 10 digs around south London, always striking in the evening, in order to avoid suspicion. "I'm not allowed to do it because it's not my land, which is why I started doing it during the night," Mr Reynolds said.

Most passing drivers and pedestrians are sympathetic to the guerilla gardeners, honking their horns or giving a thumbs-up in support. However, local authorities are not as impressed.

"We do think it's a bit silly, the idea of people going around doing it on council property. We don't appreciate people interfering," one councillor told a TV news reporter.

But Mr Reynolds replied: "I don't think it's silly at all. I think I'm helping them to do their jobs without complaining about it."

So far, the guerilla gardeners have managed to avoid arrest or any fines or bans from local author-



The leader of the group, Richard Reynolds, at work on a beautification project in south London.
Photo: Kelvin Chan

ities, although Mr Reynolds said they have had a few hairy moments with the police.

"The police did pull up once when we were gardening. I was there with four or five other people. They drove up in a van big enough to take us all away, and I thought our time has come," Mr Reynolds

said. "They said 'What are you doing?' We said 'We're gardening. I'm doing voluntary community service.' They raised an eyebrow and they drove off."

Other would-be guerilla gardeners around the country have not been so lucky. In October, Oxford resident Malcolm Everton, 56, was

banned by a local anti-nuisance committee from doing any gardening because he was tending plants, clearing plants and painting fences in his public housing estate without permission.

For some, the clandestine nature of guerilla gardening is part of the reason to join. "This is my fourth mission," said Anne Slater, with a mischievous smile.

"For those of use who are not particularly adventurous, it's a little thrill," said Ms Slater, a Canadian who has lived in London since 1969. "London can be a scruffy, dirty city, dirty compared to other European cities. But this patch, no one's messed it up since they started on it several weeks ago. It shows that if you start improving things it will start perpetuating itself."

Another volunteer, Iona Blair, 17, said: "You always see places like this, not bad enough for the government to do anything about but it's not exciting either."

The guerilla gardeners were working on a triangular traffic

island divided by a bicycle lane. The group had already spent a few weeks landscaping the bottom half, clearing out the weeds, planting lavender bushes in neat rows, and covering the tilled soil with mulch. On this night they planned to do the other, much bigger part as well.

For the project, the group's biggest so far, Mr Reynolds bought lavender plants worth \$2,700, ideal because they are hardy and not thirsty. He also cadged forks, spades, trowels and gardening gloves from clothing retailer Timberland, which supports such community projects.

Funding comes both from Mr Reynolds' own pocket and from donations. After he started he discovered similar groups had already been operating in Toronto and New York.

He wants to inspire people to start landscaping their own public areas. "It's not about me taking on London with my guerillas. It's about people taking it up on their own."