Organic culture jamming

If you thought gardening was for fuddy-duddies in khaki shorts and hats, brace yourself for attack from guerrilla gardeners, coming soon to a street corner near you. Annie West reports from the field, er, verge.

It's unlikely to be noticed at first—a flower here, a shrub there, but across the world ranks are swelling as gardeners, often dismissed as peaceful, kindly folk, adopt stealth tactics to carry out a green war on a world that increasingly ignores the natural environment.

Practitioners and others in the know call it guerrilla gardening; a subversive and often more political version of its traditional, socially acceptable cousin. Guerrilla gardening is principally about reclaiming abandoned or neglected land and growing flowers or vegetables on it to make some kind of socio-political point, or no point at all, depending on the gardener.

Canadian guerrilla gardener Mary Henry says her operations are “sneak attacks on areas in my neighbourhood that are horticultural wastelands; places that have become, or are in danger of being overgrown by weeds.”

Battle grounds in this quiet, non-violent war can be anything from a crack in street paving to a privately-owned plot of derelict and weed-ridden land.

Technically, guerrilla gardening is illegal, as most of it involves trespassing, but few can begrudge what has been dubbed organic culture jamming, and its heart for improving urban environments. Weapons include packets of seeds and bulbs, bags of compost and mulch, and a clutter of spades, watering cans, pitchforks and hoes.

Although not a new concept—it's been around since the seventies when activists started throwing harmless seed bombs in public spaces—support for guerrilla gardening in Britain grew significantly in the nineties, becoming most visible in 1996 when it formed the basis for an occupation of land in Wandsworth, London.

Activists marched under the banner “The Land is Ours” and protested the misuse of urban land, lack of affordable housing and the deterioration of the urban environment. Its popularity has increased steadily worldwide.

Today, guerrilla gardeners are as varied as the spaces on which they put their green fingers to work. No longer only associated with extremists, guerrilla gardeners are just as likely to be feisty old ladies not content with coddling camellias in their spare time. Many are young and community-minded, such as London-based guerrilla gardener Richard Reynolds who habitually plants up ugly traffic circles and verges. His efforts were recently recognised by his local council.

“I really garden to smarten up my neighbourhood. I don’t want my friends and family to think I live in a grotty area. But it’s something I enjoy, too, and I don’t have my own space for it.”

“I also believe that the local council should focus their resources on more important civic services such as health, police, education, road surfaces, and that public space should be the responsibility of the community— from gardening to hard landscaping,” he says, adding, “I like the fun of doing something a little subversive, for now.”

There’s an educational slant to guerrilla gardening, too. With increased awareness of the harm caused by chemicals, mass-produced fast food and vegetables grown out of season, guerrilla gardens are often used for organic vegetable plots.

An overgrown verge or traffic island forgotten by the municipality but replanted overnight with a variety of wild flowers not only tidies the place up, but also creates a habitat for small mammals and insects normally homeless in the city. It can foster neighbourhood pride and may even spur the municipality into action.

Go on, go wild

Go ON. There’s a whole world waiting to be reclaimed and it begins on your street corner.

* Choose a patch of ground that is untended. Fiddling with worked

land, such as the Jameson Park rose garden, isn’t a good idea, even if it is not to your taste.

Overgrown verges, neglected traffic islands, service lanes, and the bases of lamp posts are areas worth trying. Make sure you haven’t mistaken a nature reserve like Burman Bush for suitable ground.

* Think big, but start small. If you’re not a regular gardener, don’t bite off more than you can chew. Choose a small, easily accessible spot, plant a few hardy plants and take it from there.

* A spade and fork are useful gardening tools. Try junk yards or the South Plaza market for cheap second-hand ones. A bucket, watering can and jerry can are always handy, too. You may need to carry water to your site.

* If you make only one point, let it be in praise of indigenous plants. Our floral kingdom is enormous, so there’s no need to borrow hand-me-downs from the rest of the world. Besides, indigenous plants, especially ones particular to Kwazulu-Natal, are designed for our conditions, so the chances are they’ll grow better.

* Pull out and burn invasive alien plants such as cat’s claw creeper, some species of lantana and bugweed. Something that grows like the clappers may look like a winner, but not all plants are as innocent as they seem.

* Unless you are extremely committed, plant something that grows easily and won’t need a lot of water or extra feeding. This is where many indigenous plants come into their own.

* Save money by growing plants from seed at home and plant ing them when they look strong enough to cope on their own.

* Use mulch and compost. Compost is well-rotted organic matter that enriches soil and encourages friendly bugs.

A top layer of mulch, such as grass clippings or dead leaves, keeps out weeds and keeps in moisture.

* Expect some vegetables and flowers to go missing. Plant extra for birds, insects and for those whose fingers are lighter than they are green.

* Source indigenous plants from your local nursery. Try Robynale Nature Centre at 031 764 6329 or Tropical Nursery at 031 268 4925, if you live in the Durban area.