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GUERRILLA GARDENING

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In 2004, longtime London-resident Richard Reynolds found himself living in a concrete high-rise, with no room for even the simplest window box garden. Walking to and from work each day, he observed the building's flowerbeds, planters, and shrubberies—all withering in a state of weed-ridden decay. Rather than seek assistance, he took it upon himself to clear out and replant the grounds under the cover of night.

That "simple private act of gardening," Richard explains, "led to something much bigger." He was pleased with his progress and wanted to connect with other horticulture buffs, so he created a website to show off his progress, Guerrillagardening.org. The site now boasts hundreds of "troops" worldwide, committed to the re-greening of the barren urban areas Richard calls "orphaned land."

Guerrillagardening.org is just the latest in a proud tradition of rogue green thumbs. In 1973, New York City's Green Guerrillas began making clumps of soil and compost into "seed grenades." They threw these fertile bombs over fences and into vacant lots, hoping to introduce some plant life to spots they couldn't access. Beyond aesthetic improvements, the Green Guerrillas now help sustain community gardens throughout NYC, and started the "Harvest for Neighborhoods" campaign to feed low-income families in Brooklyn with the (literal) fruits of their labor. In a more political and public display, UK-group The Land Is Ours forcibly occupied a 13-acre tract of "derelict" London space in 1996, citing "the appalling misuse of urban land, the lack of provision of affordable housing, and the deterioration of the urban environment." The group set up temporary housing, flowerbeds, and vegetable gardens, but were evicted shortly afterwards by Guinness, the property's owner.

Richard finds "therapeutic" solace in his after-dark gardening jaunts. "It's a physical, creative activity for people who have mostly office-bound lives." Aside from the benefit of admiring a box full of blooming lavender (as opposed to a raw concrete planter full of syringes and styrofoam cups), guerrilla gardeners encourage a connection with one's community, and often serve as an unintentional neighborhood watch during their forays. In fact, London Guerrillagardening.org volunteers recently uncovered a menacing-looking knife wrapped in a shopping bag, hidden among vegetation. "We're eyes and ears on the street," Richard states. "Not standing around looking ominous as security guards might, but doing something, and being a deterrent to drug dealers and prostitutes."

Guerrilla gardening requires more of a commitment than just the initial planting. Richard and his troops do frequent recon work on the areas they've planted, so the greenery doesn't fall back into disarray. "It is literally like warfare: once you've taken the ground, you have to hold onto it." A battle is occasionally waged against the guerrilla gardeners by neighborhood residents, who become suspicious of the gangs of spade-wielding do-gooders. Richard has had three police run-ins, the worst of which entailed having his car searched for "bomb-making equipment"; he had a trunk full of wood chips.

While the improvements are no doubt welcome, the nature of guerrilla gardening remains illicit. Richard points out that while city authorities don't have the resources to tend to all urban green spaces, if guerrilla gardeners were given formal permission, the city would be responsible for the safety of all the civilians who participate. So far, London officials have "turned a supportive blind eye," says Richard. "There's a gap of responsibility in the way Western, modern societies operate. Guerrilla gardening is filling in that gap."