

The lavender hill mob

A bunch of volunteers is set on weeding out urban decay.

James Vaughan runs them to earth

It's a warm summer's night and, just south of Waterloo, at the meeting point of three main roads, half-a-dozen shadowy figures are quietly gathering. Whereas everyone else is out for a pre-bedtime stroll, or maybe weaving their way home from the pub, this group is walking in an altogether different, more purposeful way. What's more, they're carrying trowels.

No need for alarm, though. What we're witnessing here is a covert operation by Guerrilla Gardening, a loose confederation of like-minded individuals, whose mission is to seek out unloved patches of municipal flower-beds and beautify them.

Mainly, they operate during the hours of darkness, not so much because they need the cloak of night to mask their activities but because they're all at work during the day. Tonight's troop consists of a marketing executive, an IT consultant, a personal assistant to a barrister, a human resources manager and an advertising planner.

And the reason they have assembled at 21.00 hours on Westminster Bridge Road in London is because in recent days there have been sightings here of their sworn enemies: weeds.

What makes it really personal is the fact that this particular patch of territory is home turf for our hoe-wielders. At the start of the year, this 20-yard triangle of earth wasn't so much traffic island as desert island, where the only things growing were thistles and the only landscaping was lager cans.

But then the Guerrilla Gardeners came, carried off the cans, dug the earth, put down bark chippings and finally, with much rejoicing, planted flowers. Lavender, mainly. In fact, lavender exclusively. There's no point putting down delicate little blooms that won't thrive in the Lambeth microclimate of car exhaust and diesel fumes.

"The plants have got to be hardy or you haven't a hope," says personnel manager Anne Slater (Stockwell branch of the GG movement), pausing mid-weed. "It also helps if they've got a nice aroma, like this lavender. Herbs are good, too: rosemary, thyme – the kind of things that grow wild and won't need a lot of water.



Garden party (above, left to right): led by their founder member, Richard, guerrilla gardeners Sarah, Anne and (left) Mary weed a patch of lavender they planted on Westminster Bridge Road, unchallenged by the sympathetic police

"What you have to be careful about, though, is not to plant flowers that attract too much attention. Put down geraniums and people will just pinch them."

Then, of course, there's the expense. Flowers don't grow on trees – not in the financial sense, anyway – and Guerrilla Gardening is run entirely on voluntary effort and stray donations.

"We get by with what we get given," shrugs 29-year-old Richard Reynolds, who set up the group 18 months ago from his south London garden-less flat in Elephant and Castle. "The biggest amount we've ever been sent is £150, which came from a

supporter in California, and has gone into a site on the edge of a housing estate in Vicarage Lane, Stratford.

"Altogether we've got 14 little patches in London that no one was taking care of. We call it orphaned land."

Which leads you to wonder what's happened to the parents. Mostly, it seems, it's lack of money that leads to these plots of land becoming unloved, but sometimes it's down to divided responsibilities: for example, half the ground we're standing on tonight is owned by Lambeth Council, while the half on the other side of the cycle lane is owned by Southwark. And

just to make it more complicated, Southwark has handed over its share of maintenance duties to Transport For London.

In theory, we are trespassing. And if you're going to get pedantic about it, we're vandalising public property by plunging our forks into earth and pulling up other people's weeds. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, the police cars ploughing along this stretch of road don't screech to a halt and make us lay down our trowels. When it comes to street crime, they clearly take the view that removal of convolvulus without the owner's consent

comes way down the list. The public is equally accepting.

"Community service, is it?" asks one taxi driver, in sympathy.

"No, it's all voluntary," we reply.

"Oh," he says, pleasantly surprised. "Keep up the good work, then."

This kind of pat on the back is par for the course, says Reynolds. "Quite often, passers-by roll up their sleeves and get stuck in," he says. "Quite a few tutors from across the road [Morley Adult Education College] have come and helped. After all, this is the view they look out on every day."

In the short space of time that it's been going, the Guerrilla Gardening movement has not only taken root but spread fast. Reynolds now has 1,500 names on his emailing lists, and small branches of the organisation have sprouted up all over the country.

Some members have their own gardens, though rather more are urban apartment-dwellers, starved of horticultural opportunities.

"I live in a flat and, until recently, didn't have an outlet for my weeding gene," says marketing consultant Rosie Doggett. "Then I heard about Guerrilla Gardening. I feel like we're striking a small blow for flowers everywhere."

■ For more information, see www.guerrillagardening.org.

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