

The new

RICHARD REYNOLDS has become a leading figure in a growing movement of so-called guerrilla gardeners who target waste land 'with forks and flowers'. Martin Freeman learns more

IN THE dead of night, Richard Reynolds is going equipped for crime.

He's got some bombs, a bag full of tools and some like-minded criminals for company.

The result will be vandalism – and he is proud of it. And so, crucially, are the people whose neighbourhood Richard and the team are targeting. They will dig what he does.

Richard is armed with a spade and a trowel rather than a brick and a crowbar. He'll be adding colour, not with a spray can but with flowers. The 'explosives' are seed bombs, a mix of soil and seeds for hurling into inaccessible areas of urban wasteland.

This is guerrilla gardening and the man most associated with a growing worldwide movement is back on home soil this weekend.

Devonian Richard is in Plymouth to give a talk on cheering up the urban environment at the university on Monday and will be helping his mum Janet tend the guerrilla patch she looks after in Stoke.

What was once a sad scrap of unloved and untended land is now a flower bed that brightens up a car park in the city district. Such a transformation of a 'forgotten' urban corner – who owned the patch was unclear when the gardeners got stuck in – is typical of what the horticultural heroes achieve.

"Guerrilla gardening is criminal damage, technically," says Richard, aged 31. "I have never been arrested but I have been threatened with it. Things got a bit hairy this week when some police officers loitered rather longer than usual and took my name and address.

"The authorities tend to turn a blind eye."

For Richard, guerrilla gardening started after he moved to London and then into a block of flats just south of the river in Elephant and Castle.

"I didn't have a shared garden or a window box to satisfy the gardening itch," he says.

"But all around the council block where I still live there were neglected flower beds.

"We could have just complained but a couple of other guerrilla gardeners and I decided to be positive, and do something about it."

That doesn't sound terribly British. We are supposed to be a nation of moaners who complain but put up with litter and general urban mess.

In fact guerrilla gardening is British – and it isn't. Richard quotes the example of 17th century socialists The Diggers. Gerard Winstanley started the spade work, leading a group in Cobham, Surrey, who planted vegetables on common land in 1649 – the area was supposed to be for grazing only.

He credits the modern movement to New Yorkers in the early 1970s who first used 'guerrilla' to describe themselves. "It didn't spread much further than the city because this was long before the internet," says Richard.

"Other people started doing it but it was sporadic and localised.

"I started a website and wrote a book and joined it together. I realised there were lots of people out there doing guerrilla gardening.

"Many more people started doing it. It's now spreading around the world."

Guerrilla gardeners are toiling across Europe, in the USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Botswana in southern Africa.

Probably the oldest is 93 and in Devon – Richard's gran, Margot, in Totnes. She is a regular litter-picker on a recreation ground in



Picture JAMES EMMETT

the town and the pair teamed up to beautify an infrequently tended triangular bed near her home.

Richard developed green fingers when he was growing up in Holsworthy, north Devon, where his father, Michael, is the rector still. Richard and his two brothers and sister were encouraged to dig in and at school there was a cultivated patch. He earned pocket money weeding on an organic strawberry farm near Launceston when he was a teenager.

His self-taught, have-a-go attitude wins favour with communities in London where Richard and fellow activists are always eager to involve residents to explain what they are

doing and to encourage locals to become involved. In some areas, such as the site of Richard's first foray, Elephant and Castle, officials have done more than turn a blind eye. They have given the guerrilla gardeners permission to continue doing their best.

Not everybody involved in conventional gardening is an admirer, though.

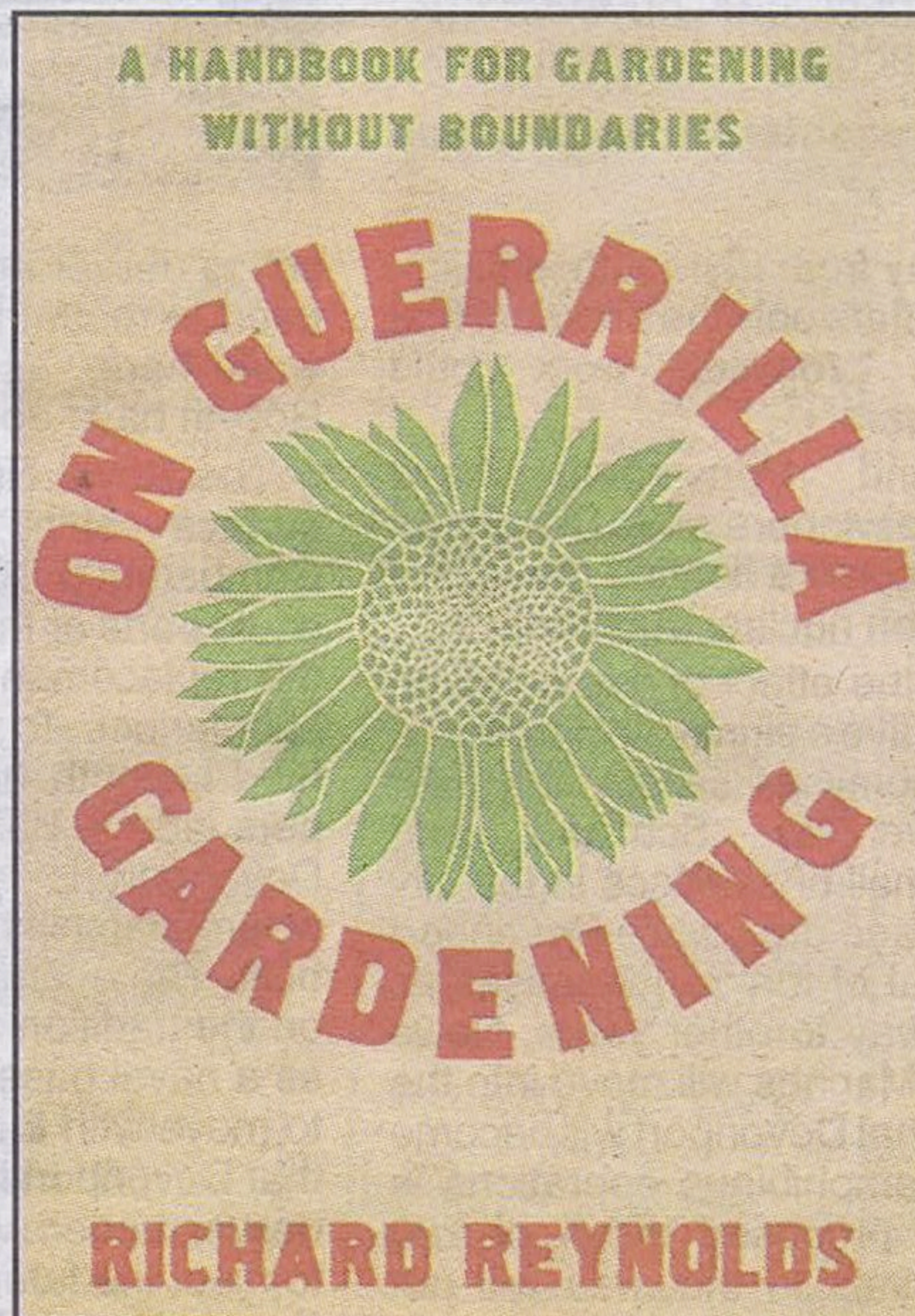
Television gardener Monty Don has called the activity "pretty dysfunctional", characterised by "japes and quick-fix" and lacking meaningful engagement. And another horticulture expert lampooned the activity on Radio Four's Gardeners' Question Time.

The Big Read

flower power



Picture John Allen EAA26360_JSA_001



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HAPPENED WHEN THE
HERALD CAUGHT UP WITH
SOME PLYMOUTH
GUERRILLA GARDENERS AT
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Picture JAMES EMMETT

TAKING ACTION: Janet Reynolds and (left and far left) Richard outside his flats in London

Digging in to transform our communities

GUERRILLA gardening guru Richard Reynolds is in Plymouth to spread the word about how anybody can get involved in cheering up their locality.

His talk, *Colourful Communities*, is on Monday in the Jill Craigie Lecture Theatre at the Roland Levinsky Building on the University of Plymouth campus from 6pm-8.30pm. Tickets are £4 (£2 concessions; 01752 300250).

The event is organised by Diggin' it!, an organic gardening project in Plymouth run by city charity, the Routeways Centre.

Diggin' It brings together a mix of individuals who share working and learning about growing their own healthy food.

Home is the Penlee Valley Allotments in Stoke where there is also a community shop selling produce from the plots.

Diggin' It organises regular workshops and classes which are open to all.

On June 13 a series on organic gardening continues with compost day and July 11 pest control and the harvesting, storage and use of herbs is explored.

August 15 is Diggin' It open day with arts, crafts, walks and talks.

The Big Lottery-funded project opened in 2006 but waited until this spring for the official launch.

For information or to book classes, call 01752 300250, email digginit@routeways.org.uk or go to www.digginit.org.uk.

Richard says: "I am quite upset by that because we always take time to talk to people (in the community), tell them what we are doing and get them involved and supportive. Many take the land on."

"It depresses me that gardening has become part of makeover culture where we are told you have to have experts and hundreds of pounds to do a garden. That puts people off gardening."

The hippy-like anarchic vein of the movement isn't restricted to gardening. One activist has taken to targeting potholed roads, others tackle graffiti and litter.

"It is a bit political in that you are taking

responsibility for what is around you," says Richard. "It is quite sad how we pay contractors to do manual tasks like clearing and caring for urban land. This gets everybody involved with a bit of creativity."

Taking control and transforming something local makes the world's greater, more widespread problems seem somehow more manageable and "a little less scary", he adds.

Such free-style, low-cost, non-commercial solutions might seem at odds with Richard's job - he works in advertising for VCCP, whose clients include corporate giants Coca-Cola and O2. But Richard sees the link as

seamless. "It is an advertising solution," he says, "asking the question, 'how can we make this appealing to get people involved?', not like the old-fashioned Keep Britain Tidy, commanding, authoritarian way."

And, as with any campaign - whether advertising or revolutionary - there is a slogan to inspire the troops: "Let's fight the filth with forks and flowers."

■ You can learn more about the work done by Richard and others like him at www.guerrillagardening.org.

His book, on Guerrilla Gardening, is published in paperback this month (Bloomsbury, £8.99)

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