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 hugging 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 lodged 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 so I started a half-bottle garden. 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 Colwich, Staffs, 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 connected it together. We got a lot 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 oddest is IS and Devon– Richard’s gran, Margaret, in Tones. She is a regular litter-picker on a recreation ground in

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, authorities have done more than turn a blind eye. They have given the 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 ‘spades and quick-fix’ and lacking meaningful engagement. And another horticulture expert lampooned the activity on Radio Four’s Gardener’s Question Time.
**The Big Read**

**flower power**

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**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-8pm. Tickets are £5 (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.

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**TAKING ACTION:**

Janet Reynolds and (left and for left) Richard outside his flats in London

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**A HANDBOOK FOR GARDENING WITHOUT BOUNDARIES**

**ON GUERRILLA GARDENING**

**RICHARD REYNOLDS**

YOU CAN FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE HERALD CAUGHT UP WITH SOME PLYMOUTH GUERRILLA GARDENERS AT WWW.THISSISPLYMOUTH.CO.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 makeovers culture where we aren't told you have to have expert and hundreds of pounds to do a garden. That puts people off gardening."

The hippy-like anarchic voice 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 cleaning 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 seen 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 VCP, 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 bristles with folks 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, £9.99)

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