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POPSTARS AND
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THE STORY OF A SHIRT

MAGAZINE

101

IDEAS FOR A HAPPY SUMMER OF FREE FAMILY FUN

THE DARK AGES KATE MUIR

The passengers in the lighted fishbowl of the 155 red bus stared in some puzzlement at us as they reached the roundabout. Why were there three people running round a traffic island in the dark, armed with garden forks and hoes? Why were they desperately digging holes at night? Why was one holding a hubcap? Was a body being buried?

It was surprisingly pleasant out there on St George's Circus: a warm breeze played in the lavender, which was occasionally lit up by blue police lights pursuing criminals out of Elephant and Castle. Admittedly it was noisy, but the plants didn't seem to mind. They were thriving where there had been nothing but impacted earth, litter and concrete. Welcome to the twilight world of the guerrilla gardeners. We come by night to sad, abandoned roundabouts, or empty concrete

planters on council estates, and fill them with life. It's probably illegal, but no one seems to mind. "I've only been stopped by the police once," says Richard Reynolds, the chief guerrilla. "The police thought I was a suicide bomber carrying bags of fertiliser in someone else's battered old Golf, but they let me go once they realised it was woodchips from B&Q."

At the roundabout, a bus driver popped his head out of the window to ask how does your garden grow. "Good," said Richard. "It would be better if you could bring us a big can of water in your bus every time you pass. How many times a night is it?" The driver just laughed. Richard lugged a plastic barrel from his dilapidated sports car and watered the cuphea plants we'd just put in. We picked up a lost hubcap and two binfuls of exotic urban litter and took the dead leaves off the cordylines. Then we weeded thoroughly. There were no garden-friendly worms – unless they were in the shadows wearing hoodies.

MITCH JENKINS

"We were meant to do this," said Richard, rocking and jumping on his fork to crack through the impacted London clay. "That's why it feels good." We left the flowerbed looking pristine, with a recycled Christmas tree at the centre, and headed off for last orders, sweaty but satisfied.

Richard is a mild-mannered man in his late twenties, with a black T-shirt and specs, and works in advertising by day. By night, he orchestrates clandestine digs with plants mysteriously acquired from exhibitions, or donations. His charity began at home, with the empty flowerbeds outside his council flat, and he was so pleased with the response that he started digging up traffic islands and invading estates all over London. "People gave us money for plants, thank-you cards, and a box of choc ices. Some even watered the plants," said Richard. He set up www.guerrillagardening.org and now there's a pool of around 50 guerrilla gardeners. "We also had 20 Texan evangelists but they've gone home. They were a little too enthusiastic."

over from the Queen's garden party? Have the allotment people got any use for them?"

We agree to do some royal recycling. A man arrives in a Luton truck with many wilting plants, and a photograph of someone in a Peter Rabbit costume standing goofily in Mr McGregor's temporary garden at Buckingham Palace, during the Queen's 80th birthday party for children. The haul is good. We distribute the veg to be watered by different people, and plant the hardy grasses and flowers in the allotmenters' communal garden. "Sure to be organic if it's the Queen," we say. "Why didn't she keep 'em? She's got a big household to feed." I plant the royal celery, which will hereafter be referred to as Her Majesty's Veg. ■

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<< Why were three people running round a traffic island in the dark, digging holes? Was a body being buried? >>

The London guerrilla gardeners are keen that people should start their own cells countrywide. The movement exists across the world. I remember when I lived in New York more than ten years ago, there were "Plant Bombers" who threw exploding paper bags of seed into fenced-off urban sites, in hope of starting a jungle. There are Mexican, Canadian and French guerrillas and I have plans for an attack in the Finchley Road area.

Of course, it doesn't always work. Cordylines get nicked, and old prams and junk are chucked into flowerbeds. Some architects seeded the Hogarth roundabout in Chiswick with wild flowers, but the council came and mowed their meadow into stubble. Drought is the major enemy. In case you're planning action, Richard advises: "The most guerrilla-friendly plants are lavender, hebe, nasturtiums, rosemary and cyclamen."

Meanwhile, back at my allotment in Cricklewood a few days later, Richard calls to say that a big consignment of discarded vegetable plants has fetched up at a party planner's warehouse. They're too tender for rough roundabouts. "I got some cabbages, yellow peppers, tomato plants and stuff left-

