Stealth Gardeners Look to Expand Their Influence

Guerrillas in the Garden

By Alexander Topping

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These are London’s Guerrilla Gardeners, a fast-growing force of renegades who are breathing life into neglected and time-worn pockets of open land across this vast metropolis.

Their strategy is simple: take advantage of any available space, however small or unexpected. They work mostly at night, when the city is quiet and no one is looking. Their goal is to create small green oases in urban landscapes, to bring nature back to the cities and provide a place for people to relax and enjoy the outdoors.

The Guerrilla Gardeners are not content to just let nature take its course. They actively intervene, using tools and materials to shape the space and make it their own. They plant flowers, shrubs, and trees, and create pathways and seating areas.

They are not alone in their efforts. There are many other organizations and individuals who are working to create and maintain gardens in urban areas. Some are focused on creating public spaces, while others are focused on creating private gardens.

Regardless of their goals, all of these gardeners are working to bring nature back to the cities and to create spaces where people can relax and enjoy the outdoors. Their work is important, and their influence is growing.

The Guerrilla Gardeners enjoy their somewhat outrageous status. "In a mild, middle-class way, it's kind of anarchic," says one member.

"We need the idea of bringing life to an area where things had died, and just wanted to get involved," said Trisha Taylor, 41, a municipal health counselor from Houston. She said she wants to introduce the idea back in Houston, a place that has taken its landscaping and gardening seriously. "We're so tropical in Houston that everything grows," she said.

As midnight crept, the area around the bed was a hive of activity. Went in the spiky and dramatic striped weeping sedges, their dark green and creamy golden stripes stark against the night sky. Other tough, gruzzy ornamental grasses were planted alongside the sedge, including blue fescue, with its riperian-like blades, and some red coraline for a splash of color.

With the planting complete, the heavy work of the evening began. Reynolds had arranged with more than a ton of gravel to use as a mulch to retain water, chok the woods and show off the new plantings. The group revisits previous digs as often as possible to water and weed, but to some extent the path will depend on the locals. Periodically, passersby stop to ask what was going on. Some drivers, seeing the progress being made, beeped their horns in support. Five dirty men outside a convenience store locked on in amusement. "This is a really depressing area, and this [garden] is beautifying it. God knows it needs beautifying," said Edward James, 46, a Stratford dweller who had come to investigate.

"This is something for the people," he said, asking for the Web site information. "I'm definitely going to get involved." Later that evening, the risks of moonlight gardening were exposed. Around 2 a.m., while Reynolds was doing maintenance work on another site, two cops pulled up. "We had reports that someone is stealing plants from this traffic island," they said. "Yes, young dandies mostly, officers. Is that okay?" he replied. One look at the roots and they drove off, an example of the "supportive blind eye" that the authorities have taken to the guerrilla's nighttime antics.

The stealth gardening movement is spreading to other cities, such as Brussels, Berlin, Paris, and Vancouver, and British Columbia. Reynolds' ambition is to record 100 acts of guerrilla gardening across four continents by Sept. 1. He's just 75. Go to Web site for the group's splashing news.

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