



Founder Richard Reynolds and his fellow Guerrilla Gardeners in London.

BY JONATHAN WARREN

Guerrillas in the Garden

Neglected London Plots Beautified on the Sly

By ALEXANDRA TOPPING
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LONDON
At a few minutes to 11 on a recent balmy night in East London, a black Ford crawled along the dimly lighted street. The suspicious driver rolled down his window to quiz a young woman by the curb. "What are you doing here?" he asked. The reply came quickly, cheerfully. "Gardening."

She was one of two dozen men and women gathered at a long-neglected public flower bed about 20 feet long and 10 feet wide. Under flickering street lamps in the bleak urban landscape, they spent the next four hours transforming the block with pitchforks and spades, fresh soil and plants.

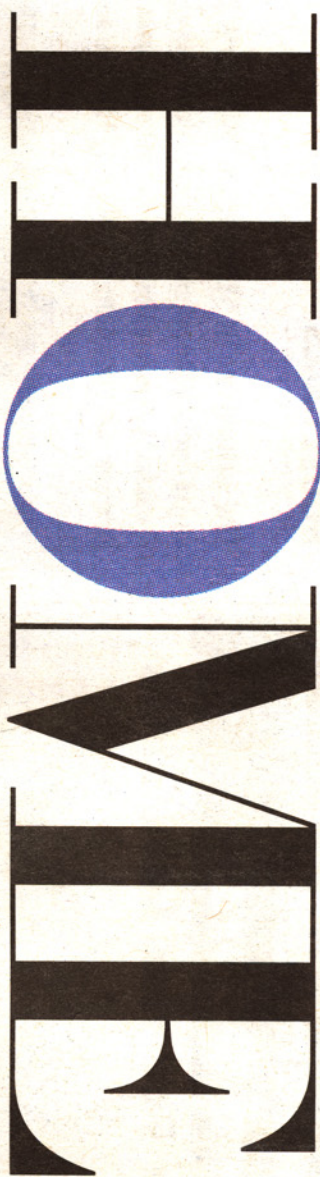
These are London's Guerrilla Gardeners, a fast-growing force of renegades who are breathing life into neglected and timeworn pockets of open land across this vast metropolis.

Similar grass-roots movements are long established in New York, Philadelphia and, on a smaller scale, Washington. But the idea is relatively new to Britain, where people are more likely to wait politely, if vainly, for their municipalities to fix up the public open land.

What makes the British version particularly odd, though, is that it is done under cover of darkness, reinforcing the idea that this is rebellious and illicit. The guerrillas work at night to avoid run-ins with authorities, some of whom may not take kindly

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to trespassers working on land that is not their own.

The movement was started two years ago by Richard Reynolds, 28, a freelance advertising executive and passionate gardener who first tackled the wasteland around his high-rise apartment in the Elephant and Castle neighborhood in south London. He tells of setting his alarm for the middle of the night and attacking the littered flower bed on his block. He planted vibrant red cyclamens and cordylines, the latter chosen because they were "evergreen, strikingly sculptural, and they echoed the pattern of the spiky metal burglar-preventing fence at the top of the wall."

Soon he was enlisting the help of friends to mount more ambitious raids and, thanks to regular blogs on his Web site (www.guerrillagardening.org) and interest from the British media, Reynolds found he was welcoming more people on every dig.

Today, the Guerrilla Gardeners number more than 1,000 and counting. Reynolds continues to fund most of the plantings himself, but also receives donations from supporters. He tends towards hardy, drought-resistant plants because they won't need much maintenance. A favorite choice is lavender: "It's wind-resistant, drought-resistant, sweet-smelling, floral, honey-bee attracting." Two or three times a month Reynolds sends a group e-mail informing his troops of the next dig's secret location. A select group of the guerrillas comes armed with tools, and sometimes plants, but Reynolds is always at the vanguard, handing out gloves and trowels and directing operations.

Like a lot of big cities, London has its attractive parks and squares, but residents also live with open space that is neglected, trashy and a blight on the urban environment.

"We're lucky in London because we have big, beautiful parks, but there is a big difference between going for a day out in a park and having greenery on your doorstep," Reynolds said. "What's important about the little patches of land around people's houses is that you can actually see things growing. You're in touch with the season, the rhythm of life."

The name Stratford conjures the bucolic image of William Shakespeare's picturesque home town. The recent foray was to the other Stratford, and to a patch of dirt that sits next to a towering apartment building and opposite a men's hair salon called Elvis Style Barbers.

Anne Slater, a human resources manager for a telecommunications company, could be found raking aggressively and pulling up stubborn weeds. She has been a guerrilla



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since seeing an article in a local London paper in February. "I looked at the Web site and thought it might be quite fun," she said. "You get all sorts of people," she said, surveying her fellow green-fingered comrades (in England, the expression is to have green fingers, not a green thumb) who range in age from their twenties to fifties. "It is mainly young professionals. But we have a connection, a common interest, and that's something to start from." And in England, where rules matter greatly, the Guerrilla Gardeners are proud of their somewhat outlaw status. "In a mild, middle-class way, it's kind of anarchic," Slater said.

There are also social benefits to moonlight gardening. "I'm married — but if I wasn't, this would be a great place to meet guys," she joked. "Fertile ground here, in more ways than one."

On this balmy night in May, the atmosphere around the flower beds was more lively street party than polite garden party. The group took breaks for tea and cookies, leaning on their spades and shooting the breeze. In among the Londoners were several American and German guerrillas, who were visiting the capital and heard about the outing from friends.

"We loved the idea of bringing life to an area where things had died, and just wanted to get involved," said Trisha Taylor, 41, a mental-health counselor from Houston. She said she wants to introduce the idea back in Houston, a place that takes its weeding and pruning seriously. "It's so tropical in Houston that everything grows," she said.

As midnight neared, the area around the bed was a hive of activity. In went the spiky and dramatic striped weeping sedges, their dark green and creamy gold stripes stark against the night sky. Other tough, grassy ornamentals were planted alongside the sedge, including blue fescue, with its rapier-like blades, and some red cordylines for a splash of color.

With the planting complete, the heavy work of the evening began. Reynolds had arrived with more than a ton of gravel to use as a mulch, to retain water, choke the weeds and show off the new plantings. The group revisits previous digs as often as possible to water and weed, but to some extent the patch will depend on the locals.

Periodically, passersby stopped to ask what was going on. Some drivers, seeing the progress being made, beeped their horns in support. Five burly men outside a conven-

ience store looked on in amusement. "I think this is a dowdy and depressing area, and this [gardening] is beautifying it. God knows it needs it," 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 moonlit spreading to other cities, such as Brussels; Erie, Pa.; and Vancouver, British Columbia. Reynolds's ambition is to record 100 acts of guerrilla gardening across four continents by Sept. 1; he has 75 to go. His Web site proclaims the group's rallying cry: "Enlist, and let's fight the filth in our public spaces with forks and flowers."