



Attack of the
Guerrilla
Gardeners



They live among us, carrying on with their daily lives as if nothing out of the ordinary were going on. But actually something extraordinary is going on. by Heather Millar

*Illustrations by Gina Triplett and Matt Curtius
Photographs by Beth Perkins*



ITY GOVERNMENTS
HAVE COMPLAINED
ABOUT GRAFFITI

SINCE AT LEAST ROMAN TIMES. GRAFFITI, AFTER ALL, DERIVES FROM THE LATIN WORD *GRAPHIUM*. BUT WHAT IF AN ILLEGAL PUBLIC STATEMENT WERE MADE WITH MERELY A FEW POTS OF DAFFODILS ON A SUBWAY GRATE? WITH MARIGOLDS PLANTED IN A HIGHWAY MEDIAN? WITH WILDFLOWERS SOWN IN A VACANT LOT? OR WITH A PARKING SPACE TURNED INTO A MINIATURE PARK FOR THE DAY?

A GROWING NUMBER OF PEOPLE ARE MAKING THEMSELVES HEARD BY USING PLANTS INSTEAD OF SPRAY PAINT. THEY CALL THEMSELVES GUERRILLA GARDENERS, AND THEY'VE MADE IT THEIR CALL OF DUTY TO BRING A BIT OF NATURE BACK INTO HUMANITY'S HABITAT BY ADDING PLANTS TO BARREN PUBLIC SPACES.





Clockwise from top right: Liam O'Doherty and Andrew Brown, members of the Toronto-based Public Space Committee; Elaine Speight and Rebecca Chesney, vacationers from the United Kingdom who participated in the activities; Andrew Brown



HAILED IN NUMEROUS PRESS ACCOUNTS as the father of London guerrilla gardening, advertising executive Richard Reynolds in 2004 found himself living in a London tower of apartments and missing his childhood in the more rural town of Devon. One night, he went downstairs and started landscaping the raggedy common plots outside his building. That first gardening adventure eventually grew into a global network through Reynolds's website, GuerrillaGardening.org. Today, more than 4,000 people have registered and reported planting actions everywhere from Milan, Italy, to Mumbai, India, to Carmel Valley, California, to Kagoma, Uganda.

"People are coming to me, saying, 'I've been doing this for years. It's so exciting to discover that others are doing it as well,'" Reynolds says.

Reynolds, 31, who does his planting mostly at night, "to be discreet," now looks after many plots in his neighborhood and organizes botanical forays around the city. (He did try dressing up like a public-housing official once, only he chose the wrong fluorescent color for the jacket and was noticed.) To help others assist in the cause, he completed the history/manual *On Guerrilla Gardening: A Handbook for Gardening Without Boundaries* in 2008.

The Vancouver, British Columbia, blog *Heavy Petal* (www.heavypetal.ca) also regularly comments on ways to green forlorn public spaces. In Toronto, the Public Space Committee organizes regular, unsanctioned plantings around that city.



Top: Public Space Committee workers digging in.
Bottom: They show off their finished product.

Often, the actions of these various individuals and groups take off like runner beans, growing quickly and in surprising ways. In 2005, the San Francisco artist collective Rebar decided to take over a single parking space and turn it into a park. Unable to respond to the huge outpouring of interest that resulted, Rebar went “open source” and produced a manual. Two years later, in 2007, 200 groups in more than 50 cities worldwide transformed parking spaces on global Park(ing) Day, even adding flourishes like energy-generating windmills to their greenery.

While all this may seem a symptom of the current vogue all things green, it has a venerable history. Perhaps the earliest recorded instance of guerrilla gardening took place in Surrey, England, in 1649, when a band calling themselves the Diggers started to cultivate an open hill in protest of rising food prices and unemployment. Then, in the 1970s, Liz Christy started the Green Guerrillas in New York City, taking over blasted urban lots and transforming them into gardens. Those illicit parks have now been turned into a network of community gardens that are sanctioned and administered by the city.

As New York’s leaders have found, it’s difficult to argue against honeysuckle and tomatoes. Or, as Tracey puts it, “It’s a simple proposition. When you see a bare, neglected space turned into something that blooms or produces food, it’s hard to not be supportive.” **AW**

Brooklyn-based writer **HEATHER MILLAR** has contributed to publications such as *Smithsonian*, *Sierra*, and *National Wildlife*.

“The environmental crisis is an urban problem,” explains Vancouver journalist and landscape designer David Tracey, author of *Guerrilla Gardening: A Manual-festo*. “We’re now an urban species. The planet is an urban planet. If we’re going to figure it out, we’re going to have to make our cities livable. Guerrilla gardening is one way to do that.”

By its very nature, the activity is organic and hard to pin down. Many green guerrillas act alone, silently, adding annuals to a tree well, planting cuttings on a curb strip, or tending vegetables in a patch of dirt next to old railroad tracks. Most purchase the plants themselves, use cuttings from their own gardens, or solicit donated greenery. Some give themselves code names like Angela 2585 and Captain Hollyhock and go out as “troops” on “operations.” Others lob seed bombs into vacant lots.