



# The Rise of Guerrilla Gardening: Unearthing the underground urban agricultural movement

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Photo by Anna Rogozinska

Guerrilla gardeners are individuals and groups who colonise land without permission and who aim to green – often dull – urban environments. The term is, deliberately, somewhat militaristic and mirrors the actions of a typical group which often practices at night to avoid detection. The movement brings together a variety of actors: students, academics, planners, architects, chefs, community workers and many more individuals. Simply put, guerrilla gardening is ‘the illicit cultivation of someone else’s land’ (Reynolds, 2008:16). Generally speaking, guerrilla gardeners either aim to beautify a neglected patch of land or (increasingly) are pursuing the cultivation of space. Many first meet virtually, before venturing out to partake in their planned actions. Guerrilla gardening is practised worldwide, from the ‘trendy’ and relatively ‘soft’ intransigent political movements in North America and Europe, to Africa and beyond. Despite this vast and varied movement, usually the subversive, illegal aspects of guerrilla gardening – young participants colonising land under the cover of darkness – are the ones featured in the media. Using a variety of tools, from social media to forums, Richard Reynolds has enabled guerrilla gardeners to communicate in multiple ways, especially through [guerrillagardening.org](http://guerrillagardening.org) and his book *On Guerrilla Gardening* (2008) with practical tips based on his many years of experience.

Research in the book *Informal Urban Agriculture* (2014) shows how guerrillas are growing on an array of scales: from

small highway verges to large industrial spaces. Many of the world’s successful urban agricultural projects started through guerrilla gardening. Such projects include many of New York’s community gardens and the more recent global Incredible Edible movement. The latter spouted from Todmorden, a small town in England; residents began guerrilla gardening in 2008 and eventually legitimised their action by engaging with the local authority. The success of the guerrilla action demonstrated the positive impact of urban agriculture in the area and opened the eyes of the authority to the potential of the activity. Through legitimising, the former guerrilla gardeners could now access funding and further support to help grow their activities.

This approach has now been replicated in a variety of urban areas, with over 100 areas in the UK alone. The ‘model’ is quite simple: grow everywhere and anywhere while involving the local community. The Todmorden team has developed a toolkit to help replicate their approach. In Salford, a city in Northern England, the Todmorden story and toolkit inspired a group to form and use urban agriculture to tackle issues in one of the country’s most deprived urban areas. Starting through guerrilla gardening, the group evolved, eventually legitimised, and now owns a farm along with multiple growing spaces. Incredible Edible Salford was so successful that it effectively employs several people full time, enabling them to carry out the work on a continuous basis.

## Tracking guerrillas on the ground

We conducted research on guerrilla gardening predominantly in the West Midlands region of the UK and in other parts of the UK, Europe, Africa and beyond. Regardless of the context in which guerrilla gardening is practised, we found that an overwhelming majority of local authority officials embraced the idea, as it was often felt that such actors were doing 'good' for their communities and helped to improve forgotten urban spaces.

Another result was that many groups eventually legitimised their activities in order to grow and to take advantage of various local funds. As Reynolds (2008) states, guerrillas either pursue this formalisation path or eventually decline. In our research in the West Midlands, we explored three guerrilla gardeners: 'F Troop', a group of local authority employees who grew vegetables next to an inner-city dual carriageway; 'the women's group', a collection of female residents who did not understand how the planning system worked and so just 'got on with things', colonising an abandoned patch of land for an unpermitted community garden; and a 'solo guerrilla', a disgruntled elderly resident who created food corridors in neglected local authority alleyways. All three pursued the idea to use the produce for themselves or for their local communities. Raised beds were used by the women's group and the solo guerrilla gardener, but F Troop opted to grow directly in the soil. All three groups' actions were to raise awareness about the possibilities of urban agriculture and, in the case of the women's group and solo guerrilla, distribute the produce grown. F Troop operated more for symbolic reasons; this was fortunate, as there were concerns regarding the quality of the soil and possible contamination. This latter troop was particularly interesting as many involved were aware of the various ways of formally obtaining land for such activities but consciously avoided this path, primarily due to their perception that they would lose control and simply become part of a wider local authority volunteer base.

## Why adopt an informal approach?

The majority of those pursuing guerrilla gardening do so due to their unhappiness or anger with local authorities. A lack of understanding about the planning system, coupled with previous negative experiences, resulted in their pursuing action without formal support. In addition, some of the guerrillas interviewed revealed how the idea of a 'buzz' and 'naughtiness' fuelled their action as they often feared the wrath of the authority or police, a feeling they would not obtain from a more formalised approach.

This initial informal approach gives guerrilla gardeners complete ownership of the site and enables them to pursue their urban agricultural ambitions. Furthermore, many of the guerrillas we studied argue that political concepts, such as David Cameron's 'Big Society', had pushed them down the informal route. The Big Society was a UK Government initiative to encourage greater ownership by communities and to devolve power to local levels. However, this is often viewed as a tool for merely recruiting free workers to perform government roles.

Formal urban agricultural projects often have the buy-in of local communities through consultation or direct involvement. This key attribute is missing from guerrilla

gardening. Communities surrounding the guerrilla gardening sites were either unaware of the action or, when they were aware, angered by their lack of inclusion. In one case residents criticised F Troop's actions, as the group did not maintain their plot well, and vegetables would often be left for weeks without care or attention. Further exploration with other groups revealed similar findings, with guerrillas moving into sometimes foreign locations and transforming the land not only without the local authority's consent, but without the permission and knowledge of the local community too.

However, the overwhelming majority of community views were positive. On several occasions it was noted how guerrilla action opened the eyes of the nearby community to the idea of cultivation, triggering others to start practising urban agriculture. A good example was the women's group, which encouraged many to grow on their balconies and on grass verges adjacent to their properties; this, in effect, created a whole new local guerrilla gardening movement. A similar effect was seen with the solo guerrilla, who encouraged her neighbours to become involved and help with the maintenance of the edible spaces she created.

## Should guerrilla gardening be encouraged?

Guerrilla gardening is generally positive and has acted as a springboard for some of the most successful formal urban agricultural projects in existence today. Indeed, these attributes have been realised by some local authorities, such as Salford City Council in the UK. In this case, they are encouraging guerrilla gardening through media and other outlets and see it as a way of regenerating neglected patches of land. Calls have been issued to encourage the community and others to take up the practice, helping to regenerate forgotten areas of the community and enable urban agriculture in the heart of the city. Since such encouragement is cutting-edge, it is yet to be determined whether this will discourage guerrilla gardeners due to the formalised nature of the action.

Ultimately, guerrilla gardening is happening now and the activity is an important part of the wider urban agricultural movement. While there are some negative issues regarding elements of the action, the majority of the movement is helping to push forward food in the city all over the world.

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### References

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