

Power to the flower

Down with urban blight! Cultivating public land, as the author of "On Guerrilla Gardening" explains, is nothing short of a revolutionary act.

By **LENORA TODARO** PUBLISHED JULY 30, 2008 10:34AM (EDT)



view in app

comments

save

Four years ago Richard Reynolds had his virgin guerrilla garden and tangled shrubs that filled the public planters in his soul. Castle, he set out at 2 a.m. wired on tea and began weeding. "A mischievous tooth-fairy or green-fingered vandal," he writes in his new *Handbook for Gardening Without Boundaries*. "He began blogging and in a short time, built a global network for guerrilla gardeners to plan late. Nairobi, Kenya; Mumbai, India, to Buenos Aires, Argentina.

An advertisement for the New York Yankees' 2021 individual game tickets. The background is a wide-angle shot of the stadium during a game. The text "ALL 2021 INDIVIDUAL GAME TICKETS ON SALE NOW" is prominently displayed in the center. The Yankees logo is in the top left corner. At the bottom, there are two buttons: "Buy Tickets" and "YANKEES.COM". There are also small icons in the top right corner of the ad.

Rey

e at

nigh

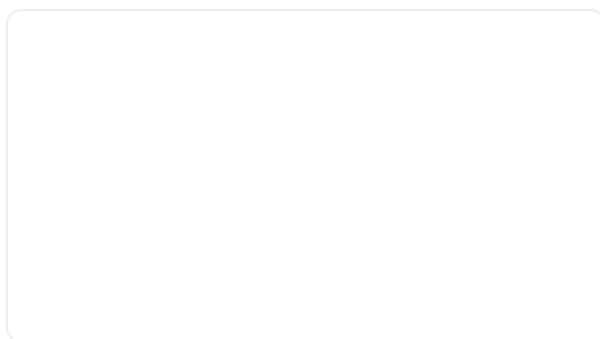
re

17th

d

beans, to **1970s New York city artists** who coined the term "guerrilla gardening" when they created the **Liz Christy garden** on the Bowery, at the time a derelict neighborhood. He touches on the Zapatistas in Mexico, who began as an agricultural movement in the 1970s, and the Tacamiches in Honduras, who successfully cultivated an abandoned banana plantation between 1995 and 2001. Guerrilla gardeners, he notes, are even at work in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where one U.S. detainee used a plastic spoon to dig at night. With seeds saved from his meals he grew watermelons and cantaloupes.

Advertisement:



 POWERED BY CONCERT

At heart, 30-year-old Reynolds is a middle-class aesthete. He understands how neighborhoods are affected by neglect and sets about to make abandoned lots and barren traffic circles beautiful. A freelance advertising executive by day, he has become an avid publicist of this age-old movement at a time when more people are receptive to the idea of rethinking how land is used (from **turning lawns into veggie gardens** to **harvesting fruit from public trees** before they go to waste). Fears about global food shortages ratchet up the importance of gardens (guerrilla and otherwise) to our lives and Reynolds' network offers a way to plug into how some people are choosing to be more self-sufficient in what they eat.

Although the first part of the book is history and memoir, the second half is more Dear Abby and Emily Post, consisting of advice about how to use light at night and find water sources. Etiquette rules: Don't steal plants, leave a mess or be a smartass with passersby. And be polite to the authorities. The book mostly addresses newcomers in its coffee-bar-conversation style, with a bit of boot-camp boosterism thrown in. The use of



Advertisement:



Reynolds shared his thoughts with Salon from his home in London about his flower power war, whether guerrilla gardening has gone mainstream and if that's necessarily a bad thing.

You promote a very genteel attitude toward guerrilla gardening in your book. Gardening on public land is illegal, so it's usually done at night, but, you argue, always be polite -- to passersby, to authorities. Is it your aim that guerrilla gardens ultimately be legitimized, like many of the community gardens in New York City?

My tactics are about preventing getting told to stop. Discretion and politeness are part of that; reaching out with propaganda at the right time is part of that too. If guerrilla gardens can get legitimized that's great. The guerrilla approach in my experience is very useful for getting to that point, but of course it's not always possible or necessary.

You use a lot of war imagery. I understand the origins of the word "guerrilla" point that way (from the Spanish for "little war"), but does it have to be a war? It seems more suited to a peace movement -- flower power, literally.



Flower power sums it up exactly. War, like gardening, is about destruction as a means to creating a better civilization. Guerrilla gardeners fight neglected land, fight the scarcity of land and fight the pests in their way. But of course using garden tools and flowers means our approach does not draw blood. Frankly, people who see gardening as something devoid of anything warlike are not in my experience serious gardeners but whimsical dreamers, the type of people who feel guilty pulling up weeds and foolishly imagine the best kind of garden is one in which humans have an absolutely minimal role -- the wilderness, for example.

You were **profiled in the New York Times Magazine, and in a recent People magazine the "hero" profiled is a guerrilla gardener from Long Beach, Calif. Has guerrilla gardening gone mainstream? What could be positive and negative about this turn of events?**

The positives are that more people do it because 1) they have heard of the idea and appreciate its appeal on many levels, 2) they realize people like them are doing it, and 3) they realize the risks are slim.

Advertisement:



The

t

will become less appealing. But in my experience this lot are not likely to be keen gardeners anyway, but pranksters who wouldn't look after the garden after their first dig. So the more mainstream, the better!

What do you think of Michael Pollan's work?

He's thoughtful and provocatively showing how nature and society are at best totally integrated.

You provide the reader with some history of guerrilla gardening, including a discussion of movements like the Zapatistas in Mexico and the MST (or Movement of Landless Rural Workers) in Brazil, who did more than garden on neglected sidewalks -- they began agricultural movements to lift themselves from poverty. Can you point to any contemporary example of this happening in the world?

I consider the activity of MST to be contemporary. There are also plenty of informal guerrilla gardeners in less industrialized countries who are doing so for far more necessary reasons than the beautifiers like me in wealthy cities.

Advertisement:

Guerrilla gardening seems to be primarily an urban phenomenon, for obvious reasons -- limited gardening space -- but what surprised me about your list of "Guerrilla Garden Hot Spots of the World" is that this movement is happening mostly in the major cities -- London, Paris, New York, San Francisco, etc., but not so much in cities like, say, Cleveland. Why?



I thi
over
find

all
||

You give the reader a number of Web sites to explore -- everything from weed lovers to seed bombers. Can you say which might be the most unusual or provocative site that you've come across?

I enjoyed Christopher's seed and clay molded into the shape of pistols as symbolic seed bombs. I thought it was a strong contrast, thought-provoking, a pictorial representation of the guerrilla-gardening approach. It's at threemiles.com.

Advertisement:

You write that guerrilla gardening is generally funded by the gardeners or through donations. What was one of the more surprising donations?

A car pulling over and handing me 10 pounds in cash as we gardened. That's the kind of "curb crawler" we need more of.

What do you want newcomers to know about guerrilla gardening that hasn't been said thus far?

Learn to love the gardening regardless of the obstacles. Gardening beyond your own boundaries takes commitment.

What do you want old-timers to know about newer guerrilla gardeners like yourself?



Tha

er

here

:

cou

guerrillas might consider me an upstart.

LENORA TODARO

Lenora Todaro is a writer in New York.

MORE FROM [LENORA TODARO](#)



Related Topics _____



Related Articles



[Home](#) [About](#) [Staff](#) [Contact](#) [Privacy](#) [Terms of Service](#) [Archive](#)

[Go Ad Free](#)

Copyright © 2021 Salon.com, LLC. Reproduction of material from any Salon pages without written permission is strictly prohibited. SALON® is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office as a trademark of Salon.com, LLC. Associated Press articles: Copyright © 2016 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

[DMCA Policy](#)



