

PLANTS AS PROTEST:
GUERRILLA GARDENING AND ITS ROLE IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTALISM

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Abstract

The simplest definition of guerrilla gardening is growing plants on land owned by another person. While guerrilla gardeners commit their crime for a variety of reasons, using guerrilla gardening as a way to protest against the civil abandonment of urban land by reclaiming it for the public has had success in generating neighborhood revitalization efforts that are based on cooperation between motivated citizens and local government bodies. Three groups (Liz Christy and the Green Guerrillas, Richard Reynolds, and Ron Finely) have had significant impacts on the spread and acceptance of the movement. All of these gardeners went beyond their personal projects to further the guerrilla gardening movement as well as urban environmentalism. Guerrilla gardening appears to have a strong influence due to its grassroots nature, especially in moving the urban food revolution forward, and serves as a good model for other radical and non-radical environmentalism movements in industrialized countries.

A rough definition of guerrilla gardening

The word guerrilla is Spanish for “little war.” It refers to a combat style where small groups of irregular militants such as armed citizens and paramilitary personnel use ambush, hit-and-run, and other non-traditional military tactics to fight a larger and more established armed force (Guevara 1961). The term became popular during the Peninsular War of the 19th century (Jackson 2004). Napoleon and his troops, enlisting the help of the Spanish armies, invaded Portugal in 1807. At this time, Portugal was allied with Great Britain, and British forces were stationed in Portugal to act as a barrier between England and the expanding French empire. However, in 1808, Napoleon grew dissatisfied with the support being offered to him by the Spanish armies and decided to just make Spain his next conquest by installing his brother on the throne. The betrayed Spaniards stood up against Napoleon and fought for their independence. Spanish forces organized themselves into small, mobile groups of fighters who could pick off a few French soldiers at a time by using unconventional strategy. These bands of guerrilleros depended on the local population for support through their knowledge of the landscape gave them an advantage. Their tactics proved to be fruitful, helping to drive Napoleon off the peninsula, and leading to the emergence of the guerrilla warfare military strategy.

Guerrilla tactics were widely adopted by many military groups all over the world. Mao Zedong and Che Guevara are two of the most prominent examples of guerrilla warfare supporters. Both used guerrilla warfare as a way to stand up against a larger, oppressive force. In Che Guevara’s words, guerrilla tactics are “used by the side which is supported by a majority but which possesses a much smaller number of arms for use in defense against oppression” (Guevara 1961). Guerrilla warfare is associated with

politically charged citizens banding together with arms in protest against a strong oppressive force.

By the 20th century, the term guerrilla spread outside the military world and began to be used as a marketing tool. Guerrilla restaurants started popping up, and some people spent their time guerrilla golfing (Reynolds 2008). The more the word guerrilla was associated with non-radical actions, the less powerful the term became. But in the wake of New York City's urban riots during the 1970s, word spread about a group of activists roaming the run-down streets of the Lower East Side throwing seed bombs - small packets of seeds, soil, and fertilizer - over fences into abandoned and vacant lots. This group called themselves the Green Guerrillas and are considered the founders of the guerrilla gardening movement (McKay 2011). In its simplest description, guerrilla gardening is the act of growing plants on land that one does not own or have free hold on. But just like their gardens, every guerrilla gardener's reason for gardening is different. Some garden for fun, others for food, and some - like the Green Guerrillas - do it to reverse cycles of urban decay.

According to Richard Reynolds, an English gardener who founded guerillagardening.org, people guerrilla garden to combat two things: scarcity and neglect. As our cities grow, land becomes less and less available. This is partially due to the increasing population, but it is largely attributed to the inequality in land ownership. Land is a valuable commodity, especially in urban areas where there is constant development. Even empty, unmaintained land can be a revenue source if the surrounding property values increase. Kevin Cahill, author of *Who Owns the World*, has calculated that all 33,385 million acres of arable land on the planet is owned by only 15 percent of the

population (2010). The rest of us have to request permission to do anything on it. In Brazil, for example, 3 percent of land owners own two-thirds of the arable land within the country (Reynolds 2008). If all of the vacant agricultural land in Brazil were divided among the 12 million landless citizens, each person would have over six and a half hectares (Reynolds 2008). Cities of all kinds struggle with this same problem. Even in England where a majority of the population owns land, they are left with very little. Of all the land in Great Britain, 69 percent is owned by only 0.3 percent of the population (Reynolds 2008). With so little space freely available for the general population to use, it seems extremely unfair that landlords - especially governments - are able to leave their land untended thus harming the community around them when people living in said community are not allowed to use it for a productive purpose. What's even more infuriating is that the scarcity of land can also threaten the existence of existing gardens. Many gardens, including the famous Garden of Eden created by Adam Purple in the 1980s, were eventually torn down to make way for residential housing and other developments. Even the gardens that were legitimized by the New York City authorities in the 1970s were only secured by temporary leases that the government could end at any time, resulting in demolition of the gardens (Brooks & Marten 2005). This was the fate of almost 200 gardens in the 1980s.

The other enemy of guerrilla gardeners is neglect. Neglect is the result of no maintenance. We pass responsibility for maintenance of public space such as street medians and parks on to city workers and hired landscapers. When the person in control of land fails to maintain it, the space becomes derelict. These spaces become overrun with weeds and litter. Dirty public spaces send a message that people don't care about the

space, and having a lot of such spaces gives the impression that people don't care about the community. Guerrilla gardeners take the responsibility for the community back into their own hands and beautify the derelict spaces without permission. Despite these gardeners overstepping bounds of law and convention, guerrilla gardeners argue that when a space is unused and negatively affecting the community, the state of the space needs to be addressed, whether or not it's allowed by the legal landowner. Most landowners have no problem with people cleaning up and weeding a space, even planting a few flowers. However, landowners do not appreciate their land being illegally occupied by a community garden or some other, permanent structure that doesn't directly benefit them.

There are myriad reasons why someone chooses to guerrilla garden. One of the main reasons is simply for beauty. People take over ugly-looking spaces and fill them with attractive plants to improve the overall appearance of the space. When Richard Reynolds first dug into the bed outside of his apartment building, he wasn't looking to make a statement or join a movement; he just wanted to make the space more pleasing to look at. One might also garden for food. Many gardeners in developing countries guerrilla garden as a way to eat because they lack ownership of farm land or the money to buy all the food they and their families require. Others grow food to supplement their diets because they don't have access to fresh, healthy foods. Urban areas in some already developed countries suffer from what are known as food deserts. Food deserts arise when a neighborhood is dominated by gas stations and fast food restaurants and has only a few stores where residents can go to buy fresh foods. Ron Finley, the self-described gangster gardener of South Central Los Angeles, started growing food crops on the strip in front of

his house because he was tired of driving 45 minutes just to buy fresh vegetables. After going back and forth with city officials and having a warrant issued for his arrest, Finley got the legal right to grow food in the strip outside of his house and has now started a movement in South Central Los Angeles to help other victims of the food desert while also drawing attention to the issue through campaigning and political action. Growing vegetables on unowned land can also be considered a symbolic gesture signifying self-sufficiency and independence from agribusiness. Many people guerrilla garden to improve the community as a whole. Liz Christy and the Green Guerrillas started the Bowery-Houston Community Farm and Garden in order to turn a dangerous space into a productive community center. Local residents, although skeptical at first, began to help out at the garden in return for fresh vegetables. When the city tried to shut down the garden, the community rose up together and fought to have it protected. Their story caught public attention and soon people all over New York City and beyond were turning abandoned and vacant lots into community gardens. Some guerrilla gardeners, however, take over empty space as a way to express themselves, free of any sociopolitical messages. Others simply garden for health benefits. Gardening has been shown to burn calories, reduce stress, and improve overall well-being many times over; and that doesn't include the benefits of eating the fresh vegetables they might be growing (Austin et al. 2006; Hermann et al. 2006; Allen, Alaimo, Elam, & Perry 2008).

Guerrilla gardening, in its most primitive form, is one person standing up against law and convention to grow plants. Whether they have a political motive or not, people are breaking the law to garden. If nothing else, this movement represents a need for people, especially those in urban areas, to reconnect with plants. This need runs deep and

arguably shouldn't be deterred by anyone, and certainly not by the institution to which we surrender our freedoms to for protection.

People-plant relationships

Many artifacts and records have been found showing that plants have been used by humans for their benefit since antiquity. The earliest gardening tools date back to 40,000 BCE, and the variety of agricultural and horticultural methods seen in human history is as diverse as our cultures. Many hold that Egypt is the birthplace of horticulture. In Egypt, flowering and aromatic plants have been found in pharaohs' tombs (Janick 2002). On the walls of the Philae Temple is a relief portraying fragrance coming from the essential oil being extracted from an herb; these oils would be used to make perfumes and other scented products. Flowers were also a widely used commodity. Ramses III describes the "sacred way" in his pleasure garden, laden with fruit and exotic flowers. Murals have been found depicting women of the court wearing lotuses in their hair. The fashioning of funeral wreaths were also a common practice when burying the dead. The Pre-Columbian Americas boast an impressive horticultural history as well, dating back to at least 4000 BCE. Three separate irrigation canals discovered by archaeologists in the Peruvian Andes date back to the 4th millennium BCE, the third millennium BCE, and the 9th century CE. Similar to Egyptian gardens, pre-Columbian gardens held a spiritual significance and were filled with various flowering, aromatic, and medicinal plants that symbolized different myths and gods from their religion. Many of the flowers cultivated by the Aztecs were used for symbolic purposes in religious rites. However, there is evidence supporting the notion that the Pre-Columbian gardens weren't

completely ruled by religion and superstition. Accounts by Spanish invaders from the 12th and 13th centuries describe the botanical gardens cultivated by the natives that contained wild species and appeared to be arranged according to some botanical order. In 1552, Martinus de la Cruz wrote a manuscript describing the medicinal plants that the Aztecs gathered and cultivated as well as the various uses for them (Norman 2017). The original was an illustrated compilation of various Aztec records that accumulated over many generations. It was translated from Nahuatl, an Aztec language, into Latin by Juan Badiano during the same year. Its formal name is *Libellus de Medicinalibus Indorum Herbis*; however, it is commonly known as the *Badianus Manuscript*, after the translator. It passed through a series of royal libraries throughout Europe before it was rediscovered in the Vatican Library and reproduced with a translation into English in the mid- 20th century. It is the only extant, detailed account of Aztec ethnobotany written by Aztecs themselves. The Greeks made significant advancements in horticultural techniques, such as grafting, budding, and enclosed growing (von Baeyer 2017). Greek writings on agriculture and horticulture spread throughout the Mediterranean and beyond during the Hellenic Period (750-450 BCE), strongly influencing Roman gardeners who maintained expansive estates in the country. The Romans stood on the shoulders of the Greeks and made their own contributions to their horticultural techniques, such as rose grafting and seed soaking. The Romans also developed specialized tools for the purpose of horticulture. Both the Greeks and the Romans have extensive records on using plants for pest control, medicine, extraction, and various religious purposes. Since at least the 10th century BCE, Chinese and Japanese horticulturists appear to have been quite advanced in horticultural development and innovation. In the 6th century BCE, they had already

developed specialized tools for working with plants and by 1200 CE, they were using rudimentary greenhouses to grow flowers and vegetables. Ornamental garden art and terra-forming were also utilized by horticulturists as early as the 2nd century BCE. Both cultures attribute a massive amount of spiritual significance to the natural world. The Japanese specifically used plants and other natural features to create aesthetically charged scenes with the intent of evoking an emotional response from visitors as they strolled through the meandering pathways of a Zen garden. Floral arranging is also a highly regarded art form in Japanese culture that is saturated with symbolism.

There are a few theories that attempt to explain why being around plants and natural environments has a positive impact on the emotional, attentional, and psychophysiological health of people (Relf 1998). The first perspective is called Overload and Arousal. It asserts that the constant noise and movement of our modern environments cause us to experience stress, while the less complicated and excitatory patterns of natural landscapes therefore reduce stress. The second perspective, the Learning perspective, claims that our responses to plants are a result of learned experiences with plants and natural environments developed during childhood. Using this lens, someone who grew up in the forests of Northern California would prefer wild forests of humongous trees compared with, say, the vast prairies in Indiana. But this theory doesn't account for people from different geographical regions having similar responses to the same natural environments. The third perspective, and arguably the most sound, is the Evolutionary perspective. This theory says that our positive responses to plants are a result of our evolution within natural environments. Research on this perspective suggests that a preference for certain types of trees comes from the benefits

that similarly shaped trees gave to early humans, such as a high probability of finding food, water, or shelter near these types of trees (Balling and Falk 1982; Orians 1986).

Modern people living in urban environments do not have the same access to natural environments that humans of the past did. Other than urban parks and green spaces — which can be fairly disappointing in some cases — people can't access natural areas without traveling to them. This can be emotionally harmful, especially because much of the urban environment tends to cause physical and emotional stress. However, interacting with plants, whether actively or passively, seems to have both physiological and psychological benefits to humans. Since the 1980s, there has been a surge of research on the beneficial effects that plants have on reducing stress, increasing productivity, and improving general well-being.

The stress that comes from work, family, relationship, and personal demands causes a physiological response in humans. When stressed, the body releases the stress hormones — adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol — which interrupt normal physiological functioning (Bruns et al.). Immediately, the muscles of the body tense up. The heart begins to beat harder and faster, while the breathing rate increases. The blood vessels that carry oxygen to the heart dilate, causing an increase in blood pressure. The liver begins to produce glucose to use as energy, which increases blood sugar. After the perceived threat has passed, the body relaxes and normal physiological functioning resumes. While small amounts of stress can be beneficial — even healthy — prolonged periods of stress are very unhealthy (Mills et al. 2008). Chronic stress — which is when someone experiences stress over a long period of time — can have serious health repercussions, such as chronic muscle pain, hypertension (chronic high blood pressure),

and a weakened immune system (Baum & Polsusnzy 1999). Chronic muscle pain can lead to migraines and headaches, while hypertension is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. The psychological effects of stress are equally as negative. When experiencing stress, people often feel anxious, have trouble concentrating, and have impaired judgment (Lupien et al. 2007; Mills et al. 2008). Long periods of stress can lead to more severe mental health problems, such as depression and chronic anxiety.

In the field of horticulture therapy, a lot of research has been directed at quantifying the ways that plants induce a positive, physiological response in humans, whether they are conscious of it or not. Plants have been shown to be effective in reducing blood pressure and muscle tension, two of the most common physiological symptoms of stress (Ulrich 1984; Ulrich 1992; Coleman & Madson 1995; Hartig et al. 2003; Lee et al. 2015). In one study, conducted on patients recovering from an appendectomy, patients with plants in their rooms were found to have both lower blood pressure and lower heart rate than those in identical rooms without plants (Park & Mattson 2008). Another study with similar results found a significant difference in length of stay for their patient groups, with patients in rooms with plants leaving the hospital a full two days before the patients who did not have plants in their rooms (Park and Mattson 2009). Patients with plants also reported lower pain intensity day-to-day than patients without plants. Perceived pain intensity has been reportedly lower in patients who have plants in their rooms compared with patients without plants (Park & Mattson 2009). In one study done on office workers, it was found that overall symptoms of illness and discomfort (dry throat, cough, fatigue, etc.) were 23 percent lower in a treatment group that had indoor plants compared with the control group without indoor plants

(Fjeld et al. 1998). A similar effect was found when studying workers in a hospital radiology department and students at a junior high school (Fjeld 2000).

Psychological benefits of exposure to plants include lower anxiety, increased attentiveness, and a calmer mood (Lohr et al. 1996; Larsen et al. 1998; Chang & Chen 2005). Perceived stress has also been shown to decrease with exposure to plants (Dijkstra et al. 2008; Park and Mattson 2009). Research has shown that exposure to plants also increases attentiveness in both children with ADD and office workers (Lohr et al. 1996; Taylor et al. 2001).

Relf (1998) describes interactions with plants as either passive or active. Passive interactions include sitting near indoor plants, or walking through a park while active interactions can include making floral arrangements or maintaining a vegetable garden. Active participation, especially gardening, seems to have a strong, positive effect on the individual, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (Waliczek et al. 2005). According to Waliczek et al. (2005), more gardeners than non-gardeners reported having enough energy to complete daily activities. In the same study, more gardeners than non-gardeners reported their overall health as “Very Good” or “Excellent” on a 5-point scale from “Poor” to “Excellent.” According to a study done on middle-aged New Zealand women, gardening serves a wide range of psychological, physiological, emotional, and spiritual needs (Kidd et al. 2000). The therapeutic effects of gardening have been a hot topic of research for the past few decades, especially on older adults and children (Bringslimark et al. 2009). The act of gardening has been reported to promote overall health and quality of life, physical strength, fitness and flexibility, cognitive ability, and socialization in older adults living in senior communities and assisted-living

centers (Brown et al. 2004; Austin et al. 2006; Wang & MacMillan 2013). Gardening through a horticultural therapy program has also been shown to slow the decline of mental abilities in patients affected with Alzheimer's type dementia (D'Andrea et al. 2007). Children also incur significant benefits from gardening. Children who garden are found to eat more vegetables and do more physical activity than children who do not participate in gardening (Hermann et al. 2006; Blair 2010). Langelotto & Gupta (2012) hypothesize that there are two reasons why gardening influences children to eat more vegetables: (1) gardening increases access to fresh vegetables; and (2) gardening reduces children's reluctance to try new food. Adults involved in children's gardening classes report seeing increases in the children's self-esteem and a reduction in their stress levels (Waliczek et al. 2000). There is plenty of evidence showing that inmates also benefit from gardening (Rice & Lremy 1998; O'Callaghan et al. 2010; Rappe et al. 2016).

Plants and gardens are just as healthy for communities as they are for the individual. Relf (1998) explains that plants purify the air, moderate temperatures, create shade, and increase relative humidity. The physical condition of an area has been shown to have just as much of an effect on the psychosocial health of a community as does the sociopolitical landscape (Brogan and James 1980). Kaplan (1985) reported that availability of trees, well-landscaped grounds, and places for taking walks are the most important factors in neighborhood satisfaction among the housing complexes she studied. Having plants in the surrounding areas raises property values of both developed and undeveloped residential land (Relf 1998). One study found that people were willing to pay up to \$12.71 per visit to gain entrance to a Chicago-area urban forest (Dwyer et al. 1983). In addition to the nutritional and educational benefits that community gardens

provide, they are also great agents for community development and integration (Relf 1998; Allen et al. 2008). In general, green spaces create a positive atmosphere that encourages community interaction, but community gardens give people a common goal to work toward together. Community garden initiatives in California cities were found to improve access to local produce, raise awareness about public health, and strengthen community building skills (Twiss et al. 2003). Community gardens also seem to expedite the community building and mobilization process, causing other issues within the neighborhood to be addressed (Armstrong 2000). Another study conducted in the United Kingdom suggests that the mobilization effect of the community garden movement could act as a model for implementation that other social, economic, and environmental movements could adopt (Holland 2011).

Connecting with plants is crucial to our physical and emotional health as humans. We raise and tend to the plants and they reward us with a wide range of benefits. This symbiosis developed over millennia, is engrained in our genetics, and should not be disrupted. However, throughout history, there have been instances when a group or institution comes between the people and their ability to connect with plants. Thus, for law and convention to stand in the way of motivated gardeners to improve abandoned and neglected land is not just pointless but also arguably harmful to both the gardeners and their neighbors.

Brief history of the guerrilla gardening movement thus far

The origins of the guerrilla gardening movement are difficult to trace because one could argue that people have been growing plants on other peoples' land since humans

began to practice land ownership. However, most agree that the first recorded example of guerrilla gardening was committed by a group of English radicals known as The Diggers. The Diggers were a group of commoners who began to cultivate vegetables on St. George's Hill in Surrey, England in an act of defiance toward the standing social order put in place by the Reformation. However, their political statement came second to their need to supplement their sparse diet caused by the exceptionally high food prices at the time. They were led by Gerrard Winstanely, who was a Protestant reformer, political philosopher, and activist during the seventeenth century, and is considered a prominent figure in the modern anarchist movement. His philosophy is based on the premise that while God created the Earth and gave dominion over the "beasts, birds and fishes," nowhere in the biblical writings does it say "that one branch of mankind should rule over another;" therefore, every person should live communally and spread any wealth and bounty among all people (Winstanely et al. 1649). The Diggers felt that they were not receiving the liberty from the Catholic church that they had been promised by more mainstream sects of Protestant reformers. So taking matters into their own hands, Gerrard Winstanely along with 14 others released "The True Levellers Standard Advanced: or, The State of Community Opened, and Presented to the Sons of Men" and began to cultivate vegetable patches on St. George's Hill (Winstanely 1649). They called themselves the True Levellers in order to distinguish themselves from another English opposition group from the time, the Levellers. The Levellers were not concerned with reinstating an egalitarian, agrarian society based on communal ownership of the land but instead were committed to abolishing corruption in all of its forms from the English government. In fact, the Levellers were generally opposed to common ownership.

However, after the True Levellers started their subversive gardens on St. George's Hill, supporters and opponents alike began to call them the Diggers, and the name stuck. The Diggers felt that the Earth and all of its bounty were created by God and given to all people equally. They also believed that the poor, landless commoners should have the right to grow crops on common land, for it is their right to "receive nourishment from their mother earth" (McKay 2011). Sir Thomas Fairfax of the New Model Army determined that the Diggers were doing no harm and advised local landowners to use the court system to deal with the issue. But less reasonable people, such as one of the local lords, Francis Drake, reacted with violence and arson. He accused the Diggers of being Ranters, which were a completely separate group of dissenters of that time associated with nudism and sexual liberation - having nothing to do with agrarian socialism (Vann 1965). In fact, Winstanley even criticized the group for a "lack of moral values and restraint from worldly pleasures," which was a cornerstone of the Ranters' philosophy. But radical groups are often wrongly classified based on their few similarities (protests, anarchism, etc.) rather than their defining differences.

The next major manifestation of the guerrilla gardening movement can be found in a casual beautification movement from the late 1800s. Fiction author Mrs. Ewing wrote a children's story about a girl named Mary who finds the "waste spaces" of her town and plants her favorite flowers which will "re-sow themselves, perpetuate themselves, and multiply themselves" (McKay 2011). Readers were so inspired by Mary's form of fictional gardening that they began to emulate her actions in the real world. The practice, known as Mary-meadowing, became so popular that people formed an informal organization, the "Parkinson Society," dedicated to beautifying bare places of

their neighborhoods. The Society was formed with the purpose of spreading knowledge, literature, and seeds of wildflowers for the purpose of Mary-meadowing and general beautification. Members would also use the organization as a means to coordinate group plantings in waste spaces, which is a practice seen today all over the forum pages of Richard Reynolds's blog. The Mary-meadowers participated in many of the same activities that guerrilla gardeners do, but their purpose for doing so was not the same. Mary-meadowers gardened as a hobby, to beautify their streets, not to creatively speak out against social injustice.

The legend of Johnny Appleseed spreading apple seeds wherever he went can also be seen as a fictionalized version of the guerrilla gardening idea. Johnny Appleseed, or John Chapman, did not actually spread apple seeds wherever he went; instead, he planted nurseries, protected them with fencing, left them in the care of a trusted neighbor, and then would return every year or two to check up on them (Schmidt 2006). While he didn't participate in a primitive form of seed-bombing as the legend describes, he was a fierce conservationist and advocate for the back-to-the-land spirit exhibited by Native American tribes. He spread his Christianity-inspired teachings wherever he traveled and was considered "undoubtedly a man of genius" (Haley 1871).

The Diggers of the 1600s inspired a group of actors turned community action-activists in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco during the 1960s who went by the same name. The Diggers of the 1960s were less focused on growing food and spent much of their time addressing other aspects of community health. In addition to organizing concerts and political art for the whole community to enjoy, they also provided free food, medical care, and temporary housing for those who couldn't afford it

(“Overview: who were...” n.d.). The Diggers of the ‘60s believed in a society free from land ownership, and in that way they were similar to the original Diggers. However, they were not so much gardeners as they were a group of performance artists and community activists who influenced other politicized street theater and grassroots campaigns across the country.

The next major subversive gardening event was the establishment of the People’s Park in Berkeley, CA, which would eventually lead to a violent riot on the park grounds. People’s Park was founded on a piece of derelict land that was abandoned after the University of California ran out of funding to build athletic fields on a 2.8-acre piece of land south of the UC Berkeley campus (Brenneman 2004). The lot became an eye-sore and local residents and business owners banded together to convert the space into a public park. Through grassroots organization, roughly a thousand people became directly involved in the establishment of this garden and completed the project in just a few weeks. The unauthorized construction of the park echoed the subversive attitudes held by students on the university campus. City officials felt that the university administrators were being too lenient with what they saw as punishable behavior. Governor Ronald Reagan called the UC Berkeley campus "a haven for communist sympathizers, protesters, and sex deviants" and felt that the establishment of People’s Park was a direct violation of the university’s land rights (Rosenfeld 2002). He decided to make an example out of the park and on May 15, 1969, at the request of the Berkeley mayor, ordered local police officers as well as California Highway Patrol officers to clean out much of what had been constructed and planted by the residents and then erect a fence around the land to prevent people from accessing the park grounds (Gjerde et al. 2002). Around noon of the same



This famous photo shows peaceful student protesters sliding daisies into the barrels of the police officers' firearms during the May 15, 1969 protest at People's Park.

day, an anti-war rally at Sproul Plaza, a park on the south side of campus just a few blocks from People's Park, was interrupted by student concerns about the fencing-off and destruction of the park. Student Body President Dan Siegel took the podium to speak on the issue, eventually shouting, "Let's take the park!" While his words were intended to be benign, they ignited the crowd of roughly 3,000 who began to march toward People's Park shouting, "We want the park!" (Tempest 2007). The rioters attempted to tear down the fence and threw bottles and bricks at the officers ordered to guard the park. The officers responded with tear gas but Reagan's Chief of Staff, Edwin Meese III, known for his firm opposition to protestors, allowed the officers to use any means necessary to quell the crowd that had now swelled to almost 6,000 (Gjerde et al. 2002; Rosenfeld 2002). The officers decided to use shotguns with "00" buckshot shells as ammunition, which was described as "sheer insanity" by Dr. Harry Brean, who at the time was chief radiologist at Berkeley's Herrick Hospital (Gjerde et al. 2002). Even Sheriff Frank Madigan admitted that some of the deputies who had served in Vietnam had been unnecessarily aggressive with the protestors, saying that they were acting "as though they

were Viet Cong,” (Copeland and Arai 1969; “California: Postscript...” 1970). The use of shotguns left many protesters and officers injured, permanently blinded carpenter Alan Blanchard, and left student James Rector, who was reportedly just a bystander, dead. (“California: Postscript...” 1970). Many were injured that day and it took until the late 70s for the park to go public again. It is still in operation today and includes a bike path, a dog park, and an organic community garden. It is now co-managed by the University of California and the Berkeley community.

As mentioned earlier, most people consider artist Liz Christy and her gang of gardeners throwing seed bombs over fences as the starting point of the contemporary guerrilla gardening movement. During the financial crisis of the 1970s, vacant lots and abandoned buildings abundantly dotted the urban landscape of New York City. Christy and a few other activists began to make seed bombs and distribute them around their Lower East Side neighborhood (“History of the Community...” n.d.). They put flower boxes on abandoned buildings and planted trees in vacant lots. Soon they turned their attention to a derelict space on the Northeast corner of the intersection at Bowery and E. Houston Street. The Green Guerrillas spent about a year cleaning up and beautifying the space. Eventually, 60 vegetable beds were built and the space became known as the “Bowery Houston Community Farm and Garden” (“Garden History” n.d.). The Green Guerrillas then began to help other communities start their own gardens by giving them the knowledge and materials to do so. According to the Green Guerrillas, they believed that the unauthorized establishment of community gardens was a great tool to “reclaim urban land, stabilize city blocks, and get people working together to solve problems” (Green Guerrillas n.d.). The Green Guerrillas are considered to be the beginning of the

contemporary guerrilla gardening movement because they weren't just growing flowers and vegetables to enjoy the plants for just themselves, they were making a real effort to revitalize the neighborhood. And that is confirmed by the community garden movement that took center stage throughout the 1980s.

The 1980s guerrilla gardening scene was characterized by more vacant lot seizures such as the "allotment squats" put on by Friends of the Earth in the United Kingdom. Activists would take over a piece of government-owned land and build allotments on it as a form of performance protest against urban waste spaces (McKay 2011). The allotments would be permanent or would remain only for a day as a symbolic gesture.

During the mid-1990s, Honduran workers on the banana plantations owned by Chiquita Brands International went on strike, demanding higher wages for their labor. In June 1994, at the height of the strikes, Chiquita closed down four of their plantations in Northern Honduras, totaling about 1,200 hectares and firing 1,200 workers (Reynolds 2008). In Honduras, it is common for people working on the plantation to also live there. They live in full-functioning village communities complete with a health center and private agricultural land. So when Chiquita shut down their plantations, they actually ripped the workers' entire lives out of their hands. The villages built in Tacamiche, Honduras, were built in the 1920s. A decade later the Honduran government sold 3,000 acres of land in Tacamiche for one dollar to the company that would later be known as Chiquita. So when the plantations closed in 1994, the people remained in the homes that they and their families had been living in for multiple generations. According to one of the residents, Chiquita had "the juice sucked out" of the land with no thought for what

would happen to those who still lived there (Rother 1996). The workers still living there had managed to plant maize and beans over 250 hectares of the land that the company had deemed infertile. The people in Tacamiche had heard about the success that victims of a similar fate had in Costa Rica. A Chiquita-owned plantation in Costa Rica was closed in 1983, displacing 3,000 workers. However, the workers remained on the land and continued growing their crops (Corr 1997). This eventually led to the Costa Rican government promising the land to them. However, the guerrilla gardeners in Tacamiche had no such luck. On July 26, 1995, Chiquita sent 400 policemen and soldiers to evict the workers from their homes using tear gas and rubber bullets. The guerrillas picked up rocks and successfully defended themselves (Frye 2011). Despite national support for their cause, the government and the corporation still refused to sell the land to the people of Tacamiche. On February 1 1996, 500 government troops and 400 Chiquita workers stormed onto the land with bulldozers and began to destroy the plantation and arrest the villagers. The invaders uprooted their crops, stole some of their belongings, and razed their wooden cabins. Wilfredo Cabrera, a plantation worker living on the condemned land, called the destruction to the people's homes, crops, and churches unforgivable (Rother 1996). The Commission for the Defense of Human Rights denounced the raid, saying that it was against Honduran law, on the basis that the government had not authorized any evictions or demolitions. The United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Cultural, and Social Rights believed their actions were a violation of basic human rights. However, Joseph Hagin, a spokesperson for Chiquita Brands International, said that the company felt it acted honorably, and only after 18 months of court

proceedings, did the government and Chiquita provide new homes, churches, a fish farm, and agricultural land for the victims (Rother 1996).

The guerrilla gardening movement received public attention in Great Britain when a group of citizens gathered at a traffic island directly across from the Houses of Parliament on May Day of 2000. The people were affiliated with Reclaim the Streets, a collective of eco-warriors who campaign for shared ownership of public spaces. The event on May 1, 2000 hosted a group of about 10,000 protestors who started digging up the grassy traffic island to make way for flowers, edible plants, and even cannabis (McKay 2011). The protest only lasted a few hours and the plants that were added to the traffic island were never intended to remain. The purpose of the event was to disrupt traffic and attract attention. Once the story was picked up by the media, guerrilla gardening extended beyond being just a subversive form of horticulture, to become a symbolic gesture used to comment on the state of an urban environment. The May Day 2000 protest “symbolized an urge to be self-reliant rather than dependent on capitalism. It celebrated the possibility of a world that encourages cooperation and sharing rather than one which rewards greed, individualism, and competition,” (McKay 2011).

In 2004, a hobbyist gardener found himself living in a Central London apartment building that had no space to garden. It did, however, have an unkempt flower bed outside the entrance to the building. Unsure if anyone would mind, he began cultivating the bed in the dead of night. He kept a personal blog on the project called guerrillagardening.org, where he documented his progress. He was surprised to find out that there was actually a whole movement of law-breaking gardeners all over the world. The forum pages he created on his blog became a virtual hot spot for guerrilla gardeners

to discuss the movement and facilitated the spread of guerrilla gardening by putting it in the public's mind.

The most recent, major addition to guerrilla gardening history happened in 2010 when a man named Ron Finley started a small guerrilla gardening movement in South Central Los Angeles. His strain of the movement, which he called “gangsta gardening,” began when he was told by city officials that the strip of land in front of the house he had lived in for 25 years could not be used as his personal garden space. Finley, who was using the space to grow fresh vegetables so that he wouldn't have to travel to find fresh foods, felt that this was just another way that the city was preventing him from eating well. He banded together with others in the community, also suffering from low access to fresh vegetables, to rally for gardening space. The effect that his movement has had on South Central Los Angeles is similar to that of the Green Guerrillas on New York City's Lower East Side in the 1970s.

There are obviously many forms that guerrilla gardening can take and it all depends on the motivations and goals that the gardeners themselves have. However, the Green Guerrillas, Richard Reynolds, and Ron Finley have undoubtedly had the most profound effects on the movement. In their own ways, each used guerrilla gardening as a way to highlight important issues within their communities; they also ensured that neighbors and strangers alike who shared their same concerns felt motivated and supported in their own efforts to improve the community. They transformed guerrilla gardening from an environmentally friendly art project to a vehicle for social and environmental change that depends on honest cooperation between community members and government officials.

Liz Christy and the Green Guerrillas

What we can consider the beginning of the contemporary guerrilla gardening movement is also the beginning of the contemporary community gardening movement. There had been waves of community gardens occupying government-owned land in times of need in the past. The Depressions of the 1890s and 1930s forced urban dwellers into the role of a farmer, as did the Victory Gardens during the Great World Wars I and II (Ferguson n.d.). But when the crises passed, normal societal functioning resumed and the once-flourishing spaces were left to deteriorate again. The work that Liz Christy and the other Green Guerrillas did in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the wake of the financial crisis of the 1970s paved the way for community-driven, urban horticulture all over the world.

Unfortunately, at that point the Lower East Side had been in decline for almost 200 years. In the 17th century, this area of the city was an agricultural district called The Bowery. A lake called Collect Pond and the abundance of farmland made the region a popular settling place. But as the population increased, the lake became polluted and the farmland was paved over with city streets. The property values sank, and by the beginning of the 19th century, the neighborhoods were filled with European immigrants and slowly declining into slums (Brooks & Marten 2005). In 1878, the city built an elevated railroad on both sides of Bowery Street. People didn't like living in apartments where they could see trains rushing past their second-story windows, so they left; and business owners followed suit. As the post-war economic boom began to fade in the 1960's, New York City began to show strong economic and social symptoms of urban

decay. Starting in the fiscal year of 1960-1961, New York City began to borrow money from the federal government to cover account deficits (Gramlich 1976). According to Gramlich, these deficits arose from the city trying to cover the costs of ambitious social welfare programs, such as, public transportation and public hospitals despite a declining industrial sector. Blue collar workers were moving to the suburbs and industry was growing in other major cities; this resulted in less taxable income — in the form of industrial and property taxes — for the city to collect. The city was borrowing federal money to pay off debts while its infrastructure suffered. Landlords also failed to maintain their properties, causing the neighborhood to be littered with abandoned buildings and vacant lots. These spaces attracted garbage, drugs, and crime, further preventing business owners and city officials from investing time and money into the neighborhood. Once-bustling areas of the city became vacant urban wastelands.

Liz Christy, who lived on the Lower East Side of Manhattan during this time, was tired of the unattractive — and often dangerous — spaces lining the streets. She and a few other dismayed neighbors began throwing seed bombs into the empty spaces. A few seed bombs here, a few there, and suddenly the decrepit spaces were a bit more appealing. This group of citizens called themselves the Green Guerrillas. This is the first group of gardeners who consciously participated in what would later be widely known as guerrilla gardening. And for a couple of years, the Green Guerrillas made their way

around the neighborhood
planting and maintaining their
subversive gardens with the
intent of beautifying the
derelict streets.

In 1973, Liz Christy
walking past a vacant lot
located at the corner of



was

The original Green Guerrillas

Bowery and Houston streets when she noticed a young boy playing in the trash. This lot was infamously dangerous because only a few months earlier, two homeless men had frozen to death in this lot. She watched as the boy climbed into a scrapped refrigerator and shut himself inside. Appalled, she pulled him out of the refrigerator and took him home. She scolded his mother for allowing him to play in the trash. The boy's mother told Christy that she was busy raising multiple kids and that if Christy really wanted something done about the refrigerator, then she would just have to do it herself. Liz Christy and the other guerrilla gardeners chose to take the mother's "advice" and put up a sign on the lot that read "Watch this plot of land be turned into a garden in 24 hours." The garden took about three months to complete. They hauled out all of the trash and rubble, brought in soil, and built 60 raised beds. They gathered horse droppings from a local police station to use as fertilizer and salvaged some leftover seedlings from a parks department giveaway, and within a few months, the Green Guerrillas and other locals were enjoying the vegetable bounty.

Despite giving the activist gardeners permission to clean up the vacant lots, the city felt that the garden was created illegally on city-owned property and therefore needed to be removed (Brooks and Marten 2005). Liz Christy took their story to the local media and *The New York Daily News* ran a story including a photo of the garden. The story of their garden and the gardeners responsible spread across the city and gained popularity. Liz Christy and a few others brought in TV cameras and showed how they had transformed the space and the community around it. City officials decided to back down and leased the plot of land to the Green Guerrillas for a dollar a year.

The success of the Bowery-Houston Farm and Garden inspired other neighborhoods to start their own gardens. The Green Guerrillas helped their neighbors start and maintain new gardens as well as establish grass roots groups that would bring people together to solve other problems in their communities. “Once people succeeded with the garden, they went on to other things like fixing the schools, housing, creating jobs, whatever was needed,” said Amos Taylor, an early Green Guerrilla (Brooks and Marten 2005). Even the mayor at the time, Ed Koch, admitted that the community gardens had “become absolutely necessary and add[ed] back to the value of a whole neighborhood,” (Brooks and Marten 2005). Gardens kept popping up all over the city, eventually reaching a peak of about 800 community gardens in the late 1980s.

In 1978, after seeing that energized community members could transform vacant lots into community gardens, the New York City Parks Department founded the Green Thumb program (Weissman 2005). The Green Thumb program, which is still active today, provides literature, materials, and problem-solving strategies for community gardens all over NYC. Their goal is to make grassroots community improvement more

accessible for NYC citizens. One of their roles was to coordinate the \$1-a-year leases for vacant land. Even though the gardens established under these leases were meant to be temporary, many of them remained despite pressure to build housing or other infrastructure on the land. The people of NYC had gone from throwing seed bombs over fences to having a network of support groups and government programs that bring communities together around gardens.

The Green Guerrillas themselves evolved from a group of guerrilla gardeners into a community development organization that also provides resources for community gardeners to expand their positive influence to other aspects of their community (Thomas 2000). In addition to helping establish and maintain community gardens, the Green Guerrillas seek to sustain vital grassroots groups as well as engage and educate the youth of NYC. Since their establishment as a non-profit organization, they have spent less time establishing new gardens and instead focused their efforts on maintaining and bettering existing ones. The community garden movement arguably wouldn't have happened without the gardens that the Green Guerrillas they established themselves and the gardens they inspired others to create.

When Liz Christy and her associates first began guerrilla gardening, citizens acquiring land for the purpose of establishing gardens or creating green spaces was unheard-of. Yet their work led to the spread of guerrilla gardening and the beginning of the community garden movement in NYC. The Green Guerrillas felt that while the flowers and vegetables in their gardens were definitely an enjoyable result, the way that guerrilla gardening inspired their neighbors to take initiative and improve their communities themselves was even more exciting. The radical act of reclaiming vacant

land with plants was replaced with cooperation between citizens and the local government.

Richard Reynolds

Richard Reynolds is an English gardener who began renovating an overgrown flower bed outside of his Central London apartment building. He was completely unaware of the guerrilla gardening movement when he started beautifying the neglected space. What began as a need for a more pleasing apartment block snowballed into a socially subversive environmental movement that attracted more people than Reynolds ever would have expected.

Reynolds grew up in Devon, England where he spent his childhood gardening. He was so impassioned by gardening that while studying at a boarding school in Exeter he took over the gardening plots of the less enthusiastic students (Mooallem 2008). After

graduating from Oxford, he moved to the Perronet House, a government-run, concrete high-rise in the South London neighborhood of Elephant & Castle. This was the first time that he lived in a place with no garden space or window boxes. The building did have a raised flower bed that stretched about 80 feet across. However, the bed was neglected and overgrown with weeds. After five months of living in the building and growing tired of seeing the abandoned flower bed every day, he decided to take over the space and make it



Transformation of the flower bed at the entrance to the Perronet House during the night of Tuesday October 26, 2004.

his own personal garden for everyone to enjoy. On the night of Tuesday October 26, 2004, he went out to the bed at 2 a.m. to begin yanking the weeds out of the bed. By 9:15 the next morning, he had planted red cyclamen, lavender, and cabbage palms (Reynolds 2008). He chose to work in the dead of night in order to avoid conflict with other residents or the council, which he later admits was foolish considering that most people responded very positively to his gardening. Residents took notice of the improved bed over the next few days, yet Reynolds continued to plant in secrecy. After about a year of positive responses to his actions, he began working during less-private hours.

He started a blog to document the transformation of the Perronet House flower bed. He named his blog guerrillagardening.org, claiming to have been completely unaware of the term or the movement when registering the domain name. After trying to see how well his blog was tracking on different search engines, he found other pages referencing “guerrilla gardening.” He discovered that he had not invented the term and that, in fact, it was a practice that had been adopted by urban gardeners since before he was born. Reynolds educated himself on Liz Christy, the Green Guerrillas, the Diggers, and other ecological action groups and coalitions dedicated to reclaiming neglected and unused spaces for the purpose of growing plants. He immersed himself in to the culture and is now a self-proclaimed spokesperson for the movement.

After picking up on the positive reactions neighbors were having to his work, he started planting in more active hours of the day. While working in the daytime, he was able to communicate with those passing by about what he was doing, why he was doing it, and how they could get involved. Like the garden beds in front of his building, his blog transformed from a humble record of his gardening exploits to an informal meeting place

for guerrilla gardeners. New gardeners would use the blog to join gardening troops and coordinate group projects. Long-time guerrilla gardeners shared their experiences and expertise on the blog's message boards, adding links to their own guerrilla gardening websites. The community expanded, both online and off, catapulting Reynolds to the forefront of the guerrilla gardening movement in the United Kingdom (Hardman 2011). After Reynolds was laid off from an advertising firm in 2006, he had enough time and cultural clout to coordinate large groups of volunteers aimed at completing large-scale guerrilla gardening projects. One such project, completed over four nights in 2006, boasted a group of 80 gardeners who turned a large, triangular median of grass into a colorful garden outfitted with trees and lavender.

In his book, *On Guerrilla Gardening*, Reynolds says that one of the enemies he's fighting is orphaned land, which is property that has been either abandoned or forgotten. Orphaned land can come in the form of roadside strips and traffic medians — land that is too small to turn into a park or sell to a developer but too large to be included in the normal street maintenance performed by the city workers. Orphaned land also arises from pieces of property that lie on the border of two neighboring boroughs. For example, one of Reynolds' guerrilla gardening sites is a triangular traffic island that is bisected by a bike path that doubles as the boundary line between the London boroughs of Southwark and



The triangular traffic island on Westminster Bridge Road after the first night of guerrilla gardening and again two years later.

Lambeth. Because responsibility for the plot of land is divided, both boroughs decided to neglect their portion, letting the whole island go overgrown until Reynolds stepped in. But just because land is orphaned, doesn't necessarily mean that it is free for the taking.

Despite the positive reception that Reynolds' work had with community members, the city horticulturists were not so keen on his unauthorized garden. In the summer of 2007, the London Borough of Southwark spontaneously decided that after over 30 years of neglect, it was time to resume maintenance on the Perronet House garden beds. Upon hearing this, Reynolds arranged to meet with them to discuss what he had done with the beds in their absence. When they met, the horticulturists had obscured their eyes with sunglasses and were very unfriendly with Reynolds. They passed on his offer to enter his flat and discuss the beds over some tea, and even threatened to tear out his 3-year-old garden. In response to the horticulturists' unnecessarily aggressive attitude toward the garden beds, Reynolds successfully rallied with other residents to acquire the government's permission to continue his garden.

In just a few years, his blog evolved from a record of his gardening exploits into an informal meeting place for other guerrilla gardeners. Today, the online community hosts message boards for most major countries around the world and as of December 2, 2017, has 42,353 registered members. Like the Green Guerrillas of NYC as well as the GreenThumb organization, guerrillagardening.org provides tools, information, and support for gardening projects; however, the blog focuses more on subversive gardening rather than on community garden establishment and community development.

Richard Reynolds has undoubtedly had a profound effect on the guerrilla gardening movement. Not only did his garden bed bring the movement to the attention of

the United Kingdom, but his documentation and networking have also made guerrilla gardening a worldwide phenomenon. Anybody can visit Reynolds' blog and the associated forum pages to read primary accounts of the different guerrilla gardening projects occurring all over the world.

Ron Finley

Ron Finley is a gardener in South Central Los Angeles who tore up the strip of grass between the street and sidewalk in front of his house to plant vegetables after being inspired by urban, edible gardens. He lives in a notoriously unhealthy part of the city and liked the idea of growing fresh vegetables in a part of the city where people have to drive 30 to 45 minutes just to access fresh vegetables. "I can get alcohol faster than I can get an organic banana," Finley says of his predominately Black and Latino community (Scattergood 2017). However, when the city told him that his garden was illegal and that he must remove it, he decided to spend the time, that he wasn't gardening, working with neighbors and city officials to spread the gospel of urban agriculture to the people of South Central Los Angeles.

Ron Finley grew up with seven siblings near the intersection of Florence and Normandie Avenues in South Central Los Angeles. The area he grew up in started to experience widespread unemployment and crime in the 1970s and 1980s after the manufacturing industry went into decline and workers in the service industry who had been enjoying livable wages were replaced with Mexican and Central American immigrants, whom business owners could pay less. The middle class in South Central Los Angeles declined, and poverty spread. Gangs making money from the drug trade,

specifically crack, began to dominate the neighborhoods in the 1980s. While the crime rate has declined significantly from this time, there are still many problems surrounding the health of communities and individuals in South Central Los Angeles. Finley, who began his career designing clothes in his garage for Saks Fifth Avenue and other department stores, decided in 2010 to take a gardening class from a University of California Cooperative Extension that was taught by Florence Nishida. Nishida is a huge proponent for urban agriculture, especially in areas where access to healthy, fresh foods is low. Finley was inspired by Nishida's teachings and teamed up with her and Vanessa Nobles to start LA Green Grounds. This volunteer organization organizes "dig-ins" hosted by local residents to convert their lawns to edible gardens. The organization aimed to "empower South LA's communities and beyond, one garden at a time" (The Ron Finley Project 2017). So he got the group together and hosted a dig-in at his home to transform the space of lawn in front of his house that separates the sidewalk from the street, called a "parkway," into a vegetable patch. The space is 10 feet by 150 feet and was covered in grass before the gardeners tore it up and planted tomatoes, peppers, chard, onions, melons, and a variety of other edible plants. By the spring, people were stopping on the sidewalk to gaze at the beautiful garden. Some people took vegetables, while others asked permission. A nurse who lives across the street, Michelle Thomas, said that just looking at the garden from her window was enough to cheer her up. People came to together over the garden, having impromptu conversations and forming new connections with one another. However, this was threatened in May 2011 when the city sent an officer from the Bureau of Street Services to give Finley a citation for his garden. The parkway is owned by the city, which requires residents to remove "all overgrown

vegetation” or apply for a permit that allows for “obstructions.” The permit costs \$400 and only allows for plants that are drought-resistant and less than 36 inches tall, even though growing vegetables actually requires less water than maintaining a patch of grass. The guidelines set by the city at the time not only made it easier to just leave the parkways as patches of turf grass that consume high amounts of water, but they also made it illegal to grow edible plants, a rule that most people would agree is a little ridiculous.

Finley decided to fight the city on the citation and their response was to an issue a warrant for his arrest for his noncompliance. In response to this obvious overreaction to Finley’s work, he started a petition to save his garden from destruction due to the city’s regulations on parkway landscaping. While the petition was strictly to save his individual garden, it pointed at the unnecessary bureaucratic roadblocks that prevent the people of South Central Los Angeles from subsidizing their diet with fresh vegetables. Having adequate access to fresh fruits and vegetables is especially important in parts of the city where most people get their food from dollar stores and fast food restaurants. So for the city government — an institution with the fundamental purpose to protect and serve the people that it governs — to create additional obstacles for citizens to overcome just to subsidize their diet with fresh fruits and vegetables is, by definition, counter-productive. So after rounding up a total of 900 signatures of local residents who believe in the message that Finley himself, Nishida, and all of their associates were preaching, he prepared to meet with the City of Los Angeles District 10 councilman Herb Wesson. His petition, as well as his garden, grabbed the local media’s attention when Steve Lopez, a reporter for *The Los Angeles Times*, wrote a column on Finley’s story that detailed the

struggle that Finley and thousands like him living in South Central Los Angeles deal with. On Friday, August 26, 2011, Finley met at the city hall to defend his garden on behalf of himself, his neighbors, and urban gardeners everywhere and, unsurprisingly, he was given permission to continue his garden on the parkway outside of his home. “This shit shouldn’t even had made it to my office,” said councilman Wesson a week prior to the hearing (Lopez 2011). Wesson promised to push for revisions to the city guidelines on parkway landscaping to allow residents to grow vegetable gardens in front of their homes. As of June 22, 2015, the Office of Public Works changed the regulations so that parkways in front of residential properties could be landscaped with any edible plants without having to apply for a permit (Residential Parkway Landscaping Guidelines 2015).

After the controversy surrounding his garden settled, Finley expanded his garden and turned the swimming pool in his backyard into a raised bed garden with plants growing out of buckets, pails, and shopping carts. He left LA Green Grounds to established The Ron Finley Project, which is a nonprofit that functions very similarly to



This Olympic-sized swimming pool in Ron Finley's backyard contains an impressive catalog of edible plants such as kale, tomatoes, and even a nectarine tree.

LA Green Grounds, except that its goals go beyond garden establishment. His group still hosts “dig-ins” at small garden spaces around the city, but they focus most of their attention on organizing events involving local businesses and community leaders that educate the people of South Central Los Angeles on the importance of fresh vegetables and healthy eating, while also providing them with the resources and knowledge necessary to help them start their own gardens. He turned the house with the parkway garden into an urban gardening oasis that functions as the headquarters for The Ron Finley Project. While also providing jobs, the community hub gives him and his associates a living classroom in which they can carry out programs set forth by The Ron Finley Project. In February 2013, Finley gave a TED Talk at TED2013 on his gangsta gardening movement. In his talk, Finley illustrates the problem that people living in South Central Los Angeles face when trying to access healthy foods, reminding the audience that 26.5 million Americans living in low-income, urban areas all over the country struggle with the same issue. He tells the story of his parkway garden and the success that he and his associates had in getting the city to recognize the purpose it

served. He tells the audience that there are 26 square miles of vacant land in Los Angeles that are owned by the city, the leading figure across all American cities. Finley described the effects that the garden had on his community and of the positive benefits that the other gardens he helped establish gave to people around the city. Finley calls upon the audience to help him turn the empty space in his city into sustainable gardens that are cultivated by healthy, happy people, telling them to meet him in the garden with a shovel so they can “plant some shit.” Finley’s talk was a huge success, currently having over 3 million views on the TED website, and garnering attention from influential people like actor Rashida Jones and talk-show host Carson Daly. Finley became the face of the South Central Los Angeles urban food revolution and put his strain of guerrilla gardening on the map.

However, in November 2016, the house that Finley had been living in, renting in, and gardening at for years was bought by a real estate development company at a foreclosure auction. The Ron Finley Project asked the company, Strategic Acquisitions Inc., if they could continue running their operation out of the home because of the important community work that they are doing. The company denied their request and told them that they would have to buy the property or else they would be facing eviction. Finley described the potential loss of his organization’s headquarters as “a continuation of the injustices perpetrated against the members of the South Central Los Angeles community and persons struggling with food insecurity around the world” (“Do Not Allow Strategic...” 2016). Finley refused to leave the house and again asked his neighbors to rise up with him to save the garden. He started an online petition on [change.org](https://www.change.org) and a fundraising page on GoFundMe to accept donations to buy the property

from Strategic Acquisitions for \$550,000. The fundraiser drew support from major sponsors who believed in Finley's vision for self-sufficient, healthy cities. This includes major sponsorships from Dr. Bronner's and Annie's Homegrown, whose president personally donated \$50,000. In the spring of 2017, Finley purchased the property from the real estate development company and now has full ownership over The Ron Finely Project headquarters.

Currently, Finley uses his influence and skills to establish new gardens and educate people on the movement that he and his associates have started. His vision is to turn the food desert of South Central Los Angeles as well as food deserts everywhere into food forests that are grown and maintained by citizens who are taking back control over their health and their communities.

Why does guerrilla gardening matter?

Guerrilla gardening has proven itself as a viable vehicle to incite social and environmental change within communities where it is practiced. Guerrilla gardening not only serves people through providing gardening space and occasionally fresh vegetables, but it also draws attention to the need for unused space within a city to be used in a way that will benefit the community as well as the individuals within it.

Vacant lots and overgrown landscaping say to onlookers that the residents, landlords, and city officials don't care for the neighborhood. When guerrilla gardeners take to a space and start planting in it, they send a message to the landlords and city officials saying that when an ugly space is negatively affecting an area and those responsible fail to take care of it, then motivated citizens have the right to reclaim that

land to be used for improving the lives of the individuals within that community as well as the community itself. Their actions also show their neighbors how simple it is to get involved in community improvement and that growing and tending to plants provides an immediate, physical benefit that all people in the neighborhood can enjoy. The ability to attract neighbors and get them to interact with plants and the gardeners is perhaps the most interesting aspect of guerrilla gardening. Some associate the movement with performance art because of this. One can recall the symbolic garden planted during the May Day 2000 occupation of Parliament Square, London. Just like performance art, the purpose is to attract people and make them curious about what the actor is doing and, most importantly, why they are doing it. When someone starts turning a decrepit space of land into a beautiful garden, it attracts people to stop and interact with the plants. Those people get inspired by the garden, and some begin to volunteer their time to help out, or start their own project elsewhere. This kind of grassroots mobilization is a good model for other social and environmental movements because it allows people to involve themselves with a movement based upon their personal interest in the cause. Not every person who hears about guerrilla gardening is going to go out and start their own project, but the work done by motivated gardeners will benefit anyone who passes by. Guerrilla gardening is a form of direct action, where community members take care of duties, that are traditionally handled by landlords and city officials, out of dissatisfaction with their performance.

Even though the subversive landscaping is often enjoyed by the community, landlords and the city don't seem to enjoy their land being commandeered by motivated citizens. While there is nothing mischievous about planting flowers, land owners still see

guerrilla gardening as trespassing (or as vandalism, in extreme circumstances) and under certain circumstances will pull up any unauthorized plants. Some guerrilla gardeners would respond to destruction of their projects with angst and either continue trying to garden in the same space or move on to a new project. However, the three waves of guerrilla gardening that were discussed above decided to cooperate with city officials in hopes of having their projects recognized and endorsed by the city. In the Green Guerrillas' case, they started a grassroots movement throughout the boroughs of New York City to reclaim unused city land for community garden establishment, and then banded together with sympathetic city officials to create political action groups that lobbied for the establishment, protection, and support of community gardens. Today there are powerful, city-funded programs and environmental action nonprofit organizations devoted to supporting the grassroots movement in achieving their goals. GreenThumb is the pinnacle of this struggle, originally an initiative started by the New York City Department of General Services in 1978 to provide assistance and coordination to grassroots neighborhood revitalization efforts. One of the key roles that the organization played after its conception was coordinating the \$1-a-year lease for undeveloped, city-owned land for the purpose of developing green spaces on it. However, in the 1980s, the rising property values of the Lower East Side (due in large part to the revitalization centered around the gardens) created an influx of real estate developers trying to use land that citizens had built their gardens on. In response to this, GreenThumb initiated the Garden Preservation Program, which offered 10-year leases for the gardens. Not all of the gardens were saved, but in 1995 when GreenThumb was absorbed by the Parks Department, it made all future developments on garden land fairly impossible. The

protection provided by the city organizations allowed the Green Guerrillas to focus more on spreading knowledge about gardening and getting involved with other political action movements that furthered the urban food revolution in New York City. Ron Finley has had similar success in fostering cooperation between grassroots movements and city officials. After only a few years of building gardens on the parkways of South Central Los Angeles streets, he attained councilman Herb Wesson's support to get the regulations on parkway landscaping changed. While guerrilla gardening itself is technically a violation of the law, when used as a form of civil disobedience, it can incite conversation between citizens and government about the problems within the community.

Although Richard Reynolds himself did not use his gardens around the city as a political message, he did encourage his neighbors to join him in beautifying the city with small urban gardens. His message was not about growing food in order to reduce food deserts, or about using guerrilla gardening projects as a way to develop new community connections. However, Reynolds acknowledged these as motivations for other guerrilla gardeners in his book *On Guerrilla Gardening*, which was published in 2008. In the book, he defines guerrilla gardening in the context of other urban gardening efforts and describes how people all over the world are reclaiming land to be used for gardening, using specific examples from the forum pages on his blog. If nothing else, the documentation of all the different guerrilla gardening projects illustrates the need that all humans have to make spaces within urban environments where they can connect with plants.

Guerrilla gardening is a perfect example of how far people in urban environments will go to connect with plants. Evidence for the positive benefits of plants has been

proven many times over, so it is time for city governments to facilitate the coordination between citizens and their communities for the betterment of natural spaces. Guerrilla gardeners embody this sentiment and would rather disobey the local government — inciting legal action and even arrest warrants — than opt out of healthy interactions with plants.

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