

Dig your work

GARDENING CAN BE A NAUGHTY HOBBY. NO, REALLY ...
JOANNE CHRISTIE TALKS TO SOME AUSSIES WHO ARE HELPING TO
 REJUVENATE LONDON'S GREEN SPACES UNDER THE COVER OF DARKNESS



Richard Reynolds, above left



Meike Suggars is pretty much your typical Antipodean professional temporarily calling London home. The 28-year-old has been here a couple of years, has a career position and isn't too sure exactly when she's heading home to Melbourne. In her spare time she likes to travel, hang out at the pub and sneak around London in the middle of the night illegally planting and weeding trees.

At this point, you might be starting to wonder if the night time tree planting is some strange manifestation of drunkenness, in the same way some of us like to steal street signs or call up our exes when we've had a few. Well, actually, it's nothing like that. Suggars is part of a growing group of guerrilla gardeners, people who are fed up with London's ugly grey spaces and have taken it upon themselves to green them up a bit. Under the cloak of darkness, these guerrilla gardeners head for the ugliest, most

neglected urban areas of London and attempt to rejuvenate them while most of the city sleeps

"I look out my window and I can see the homes of 100 people which is just not something that I was used to having lived in Melbourne," says Suggars. "There are so many more of us putting such huge pressure on such a small space of land in London. I see this as being similar to recycling or saving water. Doing a bit of guerrilla gardening helps the environment and helps local facilities like councils."

Suggars was introduced to her new hobby earlier this year after meeting Richard Reynolds, a 29-year-old advertising planner who started up a guerrilla gardening website two years ago. Though the concept isn't new (the phrase guerrilla gardening was coined in New York in the '70s), through his website, Reynolds has managed to mobilise keen

gardeners and eco-warriors from all over the UK into an organised movement.

"My aim with the website is to try to bring people together," he explains. "I've been contacted by people from all over the country. In most cases they see something that has been neglected and get an itch to do something about it. Lots of people want to do something about these things, but don't want to do it on their own."

Reynolds started with a small garden bed outside the council estate where he lives, and has now taken on a number of projects

around London. From his long list of website subscribers, he arranges a group of helpers to join him on each "dig", depending on how much work is involved. He says he's happy to fill in the gaps left by local councils when it comes to looking after their green spaces. "Councils have got more important things to be doing like roads and schools and they do a horrible and unimaginative job

and filled with lavender bushes and shrubs. Despite the obvious improvements their hard work has made to this and other sites, working on council or private land without the owner's permission is illegal and Suggars says she was initially concerned about this aspect. "When I first started I guess I was a little bit unsure," she says. "I'm here on a visa and I didn't want the grief of getting

and, according to another Aussie guerrilla, 29-year-old Gabriella Neumann, the social aspect is a big part of the appeal. She says guerrilla gardening is a great way to get involved in the London community. "There's a huge range of people joining in, it's quite funny to listen to all the different accents on a dig. It's a great way to meet new people and help the environment as

Meike Suggars



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when they do garden anyway," he explains. He emails me on a Tuesday to let me know there's a dig on the following evening, and that I am welcome to come along. I turn up at his Elephant and Castle flat the next day a bit unsure of what to expect. Shortly after I arrive, Suggars and a few other helpers turn up and we set off to a site about 10 minutes from his home. On the way, Suggars tells me the site we are heading for was the biggest job she's been involved in. "This one took four sessions, with each being five or six hours until way after midnight," she says. "Tonight we just have a small group as we are just weeding the site and getting rid of the rubbish, which doesn't sound like a big deal but if you don't do it regularly, all that previous effort goes to waste." The two large concrete garden beds were once completely filled with thick weeds, but thanks to the guerrillas' efforts, are now well maintained

in trouble, but it has gotten a lot of exposure now and though I wouldn't say it's exactly mainstream, it's becoming a lot more known so I'm not worried." Reynolds says he's only ever been seriously approached by the police once, after a passerby told the police he was stealing plants. "It was hilarious," he says. "It was about 11pm and this police car came blaring up and the policeman asked me what I was doing. I showed him that I was just weeding the dandelions and he laughed and left me to it. I have been told it's vandalism. I am a vandal with plants." Once the first site is sufficiently pruned, we head along to another site where there is a small garden bed on the edge of a roundabout. The guerrillas are all having a bit of a gossip and catch-up as they work

well," she says. "It's a real talking point as well. All of my colleagues think I am mad when I tell them what I get up to and who knows, maybe I am. It's really fun and you've always got good stories to tell. Some people wouldn't want to do it themselves but there's not one person I've met who has said anything negative about it." If you're keen to incorporate some guerrilla gardening into your OE, Reynolds says they are always happy to have more temporary Londoners join in, even if it's just the odd evening here or there. "It's brilliant because it's a way of them getting to feel even more a part of London, they are planting things and helping to change the fabric of the town," he says. ■ ■ To find out more about the group, see www.guerrillagardening.org.

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