

Working in the shadows,
a growing movement is threatening
to transform cities all over the world.

Luckily, no one is complaining.







The E-mail arrives with very little information: date, time and neighborhood.

Exact details to follow. There's nothing indicating when or how I will receive them.

The day of the mission, I receive a text message describing a rendezvous point at the intersection of Pico and Toberman.

“Wild Ginger” will be waiting.

My only equipment a pair of gloves, I set out for East Los Angeles' sometimes-dangerous Pico-Union neighborhood on a clear, dark night. I have no difficulty spotting my contact, a lanky, bespectacled young man with a shock of red hair, waiting at the corner of a strip mall that's home to a Chinese take-out restaurant and a Pizza Hut with a bulletproof window. I nervously introduce myself, and we wait for the others. Across the street, several flannel-clad men mill about, eyeing us with mild curiosity. A police car creeps past and peels off into the distance.

After a few minutes, Mr. Green Genes arrives. The ring leader, Mr. Stamen, soon appears around a corner. A black garbage bag hiding something big and heavy rests on his shoulders.

"Wild Ginger?" he asks, addressing my brightly coiffed companion.

"That's me."

"Let's get started."

From out of the garbage bag, Mr. Stamen pulls a large gardening pick and a set of gloves. "I need someone to help me carry the plants from of my car," he says.



IN SPANISH, "GUERRILLA" MEANS "LITTLE war." Armed with seeds, plants and picks, Mr. Stamen, Mr. Green Genes and Wild Ginger win small battles on tiny plots as members of **Los Angeles Guerrilla Gardening** (laguerrillagardening.org), which is part of a movement of green activists who seek to reclaim and beautify public land.

While the movement has recently grown, it's not a new phenomenon. The term "guerrilla gardening" was originally used in 1973 by New York City artist Liz Christy and her Green Guerrilla group. Disturbed by



the city's growing number of vacant, trash-filled lots, they took it upon themselves to secretly transform one plot on the Lower East Side of Manhattan into a beautiful garden—and thus the seed that gave rise to radical gardening was sowed.

Almost four decades after the Green Guerrillas planted their first flowers, enthusiasts in London, Australia and California are still using vegetation as a means of eco-activism. Their motives vary and are usually tied to urban aesthetics and environmental politics, but for everyone, a large part of the appeal is the methodology.

Mr. Stamen, a 28-year-old acting teacher, had no particular interest in gardening until he discovered the work of Richard Reynolds, a British activist credited with re-popularizing guerilla gardening. Reynolds' book, *On Guerrilla Gardening: A Handbook for Gardening Without Boundaries*, inspired Mr. Stamen to plant a guerrilla garden to celebrate his birthday in May 2008. "Rather than going to a bar or getting presents, I just asked my friends to gather in the middle of the night and bring plants," he says. Mr. Stamen and his friend Roly Poly launched Los Angeles Guerrilla Gardening and created a Web site to spread the word to wannabe gardeners who might be interested in helping out.

It was a success. More than 25 people showed up for the first dig at the corner of Wilton and Sunset in Hollywood, where they planted vegetation on a 10-foot-by-3-foot median. "Once it was over, people kept asking me, 'When's the next one?'" Mr. Stamen says.

Los Angeles Guerrilla Gardening has since hosted about 17 garden-planting missions. The group also teaches people how to make seed bombs (compressed clay balls containing seeds that can be thrown



GUERRILLAS IN THE MULCH

After planting sunflower seeds at a Mar Vista, CA, intersection last May, a gardener returned to the scene in November to see how tall the flowers had grown.

or dropped onto random terrain) and maintain existing gardens. It currently has more than 700 people on its mailing list and about 30 core members. They've planted gardens all over L.A. in business districts (Washington and Centinela in West L.A.), hipster enclaves (outside the Spaceland concert venue in Silver Lake) and areas going through the growing pains of urban gentrification, like Pico-Union.



ACCORDING TO MR. STAMEN, the hardest part of guerrilla gardening is finding people who are interested in taking care of the plots. "We're not seeking out gardeners," he says. "We're trying to get people to come to us."

Wild Ginger, for instance, lives less than a block away from the garden we're planting. He has always been interested in civic action but, like Mr. Stamen, gardening held no appeal

for him until a friend told him about Los Angeles Guerrilla Gardening. He contacted Mr. Stamen and volunteered to maintain a garden in his neighborhood even though he'd never attended any of the group's covert digs before.

Once a spot and caretaker are confirmed, the planting itself is simple. Tonight, for example, Mr. Stamen isn't fazed by our minimal tool selection (one pick and two pairs of gloves for four people), as our targets are three small plots of land, each about nine square feet on the curb between the street and the sidewalk. "We'll be out of here in an hour," he says.

Mr. Stamen has brought 50 plants to choose from—40 small succulents and 10 bigger varieties. He, Wild Ginger and I sift through the gravel and strategically position the flora. Mr. Green Genes, an employee at Amoeba Music, tills the two remaining plots.

No one brought water containers, so we walk around the strip mall to find some. The manager of the Chinese restaurant, who has been

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watching us, brings out a few buckets full of water and offers to help take care of the garden in the future. It becomes apparent that these digs can be an improvisational exercise; organizers are never really sure how many people are going to show up or what supplies they will bring.

"It's very spontaneous," Mr. Green Genes says. "We just do stuff with what we have."

Still, there are rules to follow when creating random acts of beautification. In L.A., for example, the constant, warm-weather climate limits the plant choices to those that are drought-tolerant. Succulents (such as aloe, agave and echeverias) and California natives are strong choices; with no daily watering needs, they make the gardens easier to maintain. And in all gardening activities, non-invasive species are a must.

Not surprisingly, highly visible locations are preferred. Traffic islands and other empty spaces are fair game. Public spaces, called "orphaned lands," are perfect. "If, say, the group wants to work on a spot between a freeway on-ramp and a street, no one will touch the plot because the city will think it's under the jurisdiction of the California Department of Transportation and vice versa," Mr. Stamen says.

Depending on where a dig is taking place, it may be considered an act of vandalism. However, in a February 2009 *Los Angeles Times* article, General Services Police Chief Gary Newton said, "Each guerrilla gardening scenario would have to be evaluated individually. It really depends on which jurisdiction the plot of land in question is in ... Generally, though, it's not something we get involved with." Indeed, it's rather difficult to imagine law enforcement agencies wanting to prosecute someone simply for planting echeveria on a sidewalk. "Everyone sees gardening as a good thing, so there isn't really any danger of getting in

trouble," Mr. Stamen says. "We're more worried about things that could be dangerous in the plots, such as broken glass or hitting a pipe."

While the aliases adopted by each Los Angeles Guerrilla Gardening member can be considered a safeguard, they are primarily an homage to the Green Guerrillas.

But there is one other reason for the aliases: "We want people to know anyone can [plant a garden]—we don't need to get credit for it," Mr. Stamen says, and in doing so, reveals the movement's true aspiration: to be its own kind of seed bomb. What if people on every block in every city realized they could make their neighborhoods more beautiful all by themselves, and that all it takes is a plant, a garden tool and a sense of adventure?

For now, though, Mr. Stamen and his little army are working on brightening their own city, putting smiles on the faces of the people who see their work, one plot at a time.



A GOOD GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT needs a strong sense of community behind it, and guerrilla gardening has that, well, in spades.

A veteran of six missions, Kumquat initially joined Los Angeles Guerrilla Gardening to meet similar-minded individuals. "I like the people I have met," she says. "And the number of people who get involved is impressive."

The group's population is as varied as that of Los Angeles. A range of individuals—big-time movie producers, city council members, executives, the homeless, 3-year-olds, grandparents, hipsters, students—have gotten their nails dirty at digs, many of them with very little gardening know-how. Yet Los Angeles Guerrilla Gardening has fostered a close-knit community of

civic-minded people, and membership continues to grow, thanks to coverage on blogs and by local news outlets, along with the priceless promotion brought by the missions themselves.

At our dig, for instance, one passerby talking on his cell phone absentmindedly mutters "hello" to our motley crew and receives a hearty, enthusiastic response. He tells the person on the other line, "There are some really friendly people here on the sidewalk." In a city where pedestrians are somewhat rare, interactions in public spaces are valuable PR.



AT 10:20 P.M.—JUST OVER AN hour after I arrived—we're finished. The crew doesn't have professional landscapers on its team, so the plots look nothing like something that might be found at one of L.A.'s many botanical gardens. They are, however, a definite improvement over the neglected, dusty patches of brown that we started with. We clear the sidewalk of dirt and debris, and water the plants one last time.

In addition to the feeling like they are a part of a growing, righteous revolution, these gardeners also enjoy the inherent satisfaction in claiming and improving their environment. "You don't need your city to take care of beautification," Mr. Stamen says. "It's way easier to get your neighbors and friends to make a garden."

Two days later, Wild Ginger reports that the gardens are doing fine. By taking root in Pico-Union's sidewalks, they, like those responsible for planting them, have become proud soldiers in the green battle of Los Angeles. **M**

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