

Guerrilla Gardening by Cindy VanderTol

Have you ever heard of Guerrilla Gardening? The term is thought to have been coined in the 1970's in New York City by the "Green Guerrillas". This group of citizens, led by Liz Christy, an artist and resident of the Lower East Side, cleaned out and planted an abandoned lot near her home. After her death in 1985, it became the Liz Christy Garden, named in honour of the woman who fought for the 'greening' of her neighbourhood.

The definition of guerrilla gardening is hard to pin down. Basically it involves taking a piece of land that you do not own, and with or without permission, performing various types of gardening in the space. I have heard it described as "graffiti with gardens" or "vandalizing with veggies". It does not involve replanting private or public gardens just to improve upon the aesthetics, or introducing exotic species into natural growth areas such as wetlands and green spaces.

The practice of guerrilla gardening is probably as old as gardening itself. It must be part of our genetic makeup to cultivate the earth - cultures throughout history have gardened for survival and aesthetic pleasure. We don't know who the first guerrilla gardener was, but one can be sure the need for sustenance of body and spirit played a role in the planting.

In present times as the concrete jungle sprawls around us, city planners seem to give less thought to the inclusion of green spaces for our enjoyment. Vacant lots are left to be filled with weeds and garbage. Today, groups of citizens in cities around the world are beautifying their neighbourhoods by planting everything from trees to vegetables in unused, abandoned, and overgrown corners of their city, bringing nature back into the urban setting. There are books, blogs, and websites available to aid and abet the mission, and certainly no shortage of neglected sites that have green potential. Traditionally, guerrilla gardening takes place under the cover of darkness, with "horticultural hoodlums" brandishing shovels, plants, and even "seed bombs" to quickly transform urban wastelands

The issue of permission and legalities is a major concern for most citizens, but we can still apply some of the principles of guerrilla gardening to activities that are lawful. The goal is to clean and green our city streets and neighbourhoods, be creative, be ecologically wise, and have fun.



One of the first things to consider doing is joining your local Horticultural Society. Many societies have civic beautification programs where they take on the challenge of planting in local parks, along main streets, at the town library, in school grounds. This is organized guerrilla gardening at its finest. Don't forget to get your youngsters involved as well. Kids are natural gardeners, with their abundant curiosity and penchant for getting messy

digging in the dirt. Junior gardener programs are offered by some societies to teach the basics about planting and caring for flowers, vegetables, and our environment.

Participating with your family in the Clean the Capital Campaign every spring and fall is a great way to teach civic pride and have a family volunteer activity. It can't always be the other guy who is picking up the windblown trash in the park. When a group of volunteers shows that they care about the neighbourhood, it hopefully inspires others to be generous with their time and energy.

Think about developing a community garden with your neighbours. Unused plots of land at schools, community centers, even nursing homes, can be converted to urban agricultural zones. These gardens become a way to connect, learn, and grow with others, and the benefits go far beyond nutritious food on your dinner plate. It takes very little space to grow crops for your summer salad – less than a square metre.

Speak to your local councillor or go online to find out about programs offered by the city to assist residents in greening their spaces. The City of Ottawa's TREE Program encourages city residents to register for a free tree to plant in their own yards, or to organize a Community Tree Distribution. One can also suggest a location where new trees can be planted, or volunteer to help plant at a community planting event. The Community Tree Planting Grant Program is available to community groups to encourage plantings in parks, schoolyards, and greenspaces. The City of Ottawa sponsors The Adopt a Park or Roadway program which encourages citizens and civic groups to take an active role in the maintenance of their city landscape. Get involved when your opinion is solicited at city planning proposal meetings. These meetings are advertised as open to the public, and feedback is requested about how developments may affect your quality of life. Speak up; you probably are not the only one with concerns about the lack of spaces for greenery to thrive.

There are many creative ways we can green our city and care for our planet. If you are feeling like being a rebel, bend down and pick out that weed growing in the sidewalk, water the boulevard tree during the summer drought, or plant a perennial in the back lane. David Tracey writes in his book *Guerrilla Gardening*, that "people care more for a place they plant themselves", and "the public creates the best public spaces". After all, the people are the city; we can garden for the greater good of everyone.

SIDEBAR: Books, Blogs, and Websites.

Guerrilla Gardening : A Manualfesto by David Tracey

Square Foot Gardening by Mel Bartholomew

How To Make A Garden by Marjorie Harris

www.guerillagardening.org

www.communitygarden.org

www.flora.org/cgn-rqc

www.gardenontario.org

www.ottawa.ca