



# GUERRILLA GARDENERS

Making the world a better  
place, one act of vandalism  
at a time.

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*"I will answer your questions, but I need to know more about who you work for. The GGs are an underground organization so before I do anything, I need to know more."* —TORCH

**THIS IS THE E-MAIL** from Guerrilla Gardener Quinn Patterson, a sophomore at Urban High School in El Paso, Texas. By night, he becomes TORCH, protector of the environment, waging war on urban sprawl one plant bed at a time. He doesn't even own a cape.

He does, however, wield a wicked trowel. And spade. And pots and plants and watering cans. He's an avid gardener, but not how you'd expect. The land he uses isn't his—it's publicly owned. So every time he plants a flower, he's technically committing vandalism.

But he's not alone. Guerrilla Gardening is an environmental movement taking root in urban areas around the world. Lengthy policy procedures delay the process of beautifying public land, so Guerrilla Gardeners—GGs for those cool enough—take matters into their own hands—literally. Adopting neglected plots of land, they plant trees and flowers in medians, weed city parks, and turn vacant lots into community gardens. Their projects are called "digs," and they work in troops, often with people they've never met. Since they usually plant sans permission, their work is technically criminal activity.

### GREEN BEGINNINGS

People have been tilling public land for centuries, but the current trend of radical gardening sprang from the green thumb of Londoner Richard Reynolds. He started the website [guerrillagardening.org](http://guerrillagardening.org) in 2004, equipping garden gurus worldwide with a forum to meet, talk, and plan digs. It grew from there. Groups started forming across the globe—in the United Kingdom, Spain, Malaysia, Sweden, and the United States.

These days it's hard to come by folks who love gardening for gardening's sake. The only guys who till the earth wear hard hats and chug around in tractors. It's almost impossible to grow your own food in urban areas, and most people would rather use their hands to surf the Net than get them dirty to plant some tomatoes. But now people are getting back to the basics. Victory Gardens kicked ass during World War II, the hippies gave us peace flowers, and now the grassroots environmental

movement is rocketing us straight into a new kingdom of greendom. The best part: All the cool kids are doing it.

Some call Guerilla Gardening nonviolent political activism—a protest movement to stick it to the gas-guzzling, air-polluting, corporate-minded man. But most participants simply see it as a chance to do some good in their communities. "It's just so grassroots," says Scott Bunnell, veteran GG. "It's people saying, 'I just want to go out and do something to improve my neighborhood and not be compensated for it.'"

Bunnell, 49, has been gardening illicitly in Southern California for over 20 years. "I started before there was the Internet or anything," he says. He grows thousands of plants at his home and has a knack for spotting potential gardens. "One of the first places I put in a garden was an area near my house," he says. "I just got tired of looking at the same plot of land, so I planted a garden."

He says new GGs have problems spotting potential digs. They always ask him where they should work, when they might walk past a perfect place every day. But Bunnell has already scoped out 80 or 90 potential gardens—some that can accommodate over 400 plants. "Spots just jump out at me. I recognize that it can be a garden, and I just do it," he says. "I've got places lined up for years to come."

### THE CURIOUS CASE OF MR. STAMEN

One summer, some friends were celebrating a birthday. Instead of going to the bar, they wanted something different. They each brought a plant and decided on a neglected area in Los Angeles. That area quickly became a small garden—and more importantly, the humble beginnings of a revolution.

One of the biggest and most progressive GG movements in the country took off in the Los Angeles area—and it just started last June. Spearheaded by a man publicly known as Mr. Stamen, 20, the 300 members of Los Angeles Guerrilla Gardening are vocal about their efforts. They organize open daytime digs, actively involve members of the community, and even teach local students how to make seed bombs (see sidebar). "The garden can't sustain itself without a community behind it," Mr. Stamen says. "This is a community-based group and



a community-based activity. Involvement is very important.”

Mr. Stamen says law enforcement in the area usually turns a blind eye toward their efforts, but he still encourages troops to work at night if the area is safe enough. This past summer, a dig was disrupted by the police, and the city got involved. One of the troops had planted a large garden, and after a few days, city officials ripped out all the plants. Since then, the troop has received a permit, and replanted the garden.

Bunnell says he has never been in trouble with the law. “Yeah it’s illegal, but in my dealings I’ve never had any trouble at all,” he says. “It’s inevitable that the cops drive by, but I’ve actually been more worried about homeless people or someone on drugs interrupting us.”

Not all city officials are averse to the projects. Last summer in Hollywood, Calif., Los Angeles Councilman Tom LaBonge visited one of the projects, ice cream in tow. He regularly participates in digs, and even has his people pick up the trash. He uses the media to promote Guerrilla Gardeners and publicly thanks them for their work.

All the LAGG plants are donated, either from dig participants, local plant stores, or existing gardens. Anyone and everyone is encouraged to help—Mr. Stamen sees people participating from all walks of life. “I’ve never experienced anything as diverse as this,” he says. “The youngest person we’ve had is 3, and then we’ve had people help in their 80s or 90s. You get such a diverse group of people, all races, all ages.” He says they’ve even had people on the street stop and help. Once, his partner was weeding when a man who didn’t speak a

word of English stopped to admire her work. He even helped her for a few minutes before going on his way. “The idea behind Guerrilla Gardening is that anyone can go out and do it,” Mr. Stamen says. “It’s just to get people moving and doing something.”

#### **I’M DIGGIN’ IT**

Patterson, aka TORCH, started digging last fall, after he watched a video on the GG movement during a high school class. Even at the ripe age of 15, he was inspired to try it in his community. There was an area near his house that was perfect to test drive his plans. He asked for donations from local plant stores. He gathered a few of his friends—even got his mom on board. When it was dark outside, the small posse went to work. They tilled the small plot of land for three days. Now it’s a garden of blooming desert plants. He goes back to water it regularly, and with new confidence, sets his sights on bigger projects.

Patterson has had some close calls when passers-by stop and ask what they’re doing. But they all use pseudonyms. “I’ve heard from different people that the most you can get is just a fine or community service,” he says. “I’ve got enough community service on me that I don’t think it would be hard.”

Patterson’s dream dig is to tackle the one-and-a-half-acre lot near a local Sonic restaurant. “It’s just horrible,” he says. “It’s got big trees with plastic bags, dirt, and it’s gross. But I’m going to need some major help.” Until then, he’ll be doing what he can, one dig at a time—no cape required.

#### **HOW TO MAKE A SEED BOMB**

**5 parts dry red clay**

**3 parts dry organic compost**

**1 part seed**

**1 to 2 parts water**

**Mix together dry ingredients**, then add enough water for the mixture to stick together. Roll into penny-sized balls, then set on a tray to dry. Let seed bombs sit for three or four days until completely dry.

To use: Scoop out a small hole in a neglected soil bed, and place seed. Water dutifully if you live in a dry climate, or let the rain take care of it.

You can also launch them into hard to reach places, and within four or five rains the ball should melt into the soil, giving your seed bomb the chance to grow into a rebel plant.

*Recipe found on [heavypetal.ca](http://heavypetal.ca)*

