

The Real Transition Handbook

Chapter 2: Guerilla Gardening for Self Sufficiency

Contents

Introduction.....	Page 3
Why Guerilla Garden.....	Page 3
Digging Your Beds.....	Page 5
Places to Guerilla Garden.....	Page 6
Trainlines.....	Page 6
Electricity Substations.....	Page 8
Mobile Phone Masts.....	Page 10
Utility Buildings.....	Page 10
Empty Homes.....	Page 11
Miscellaneous.....	Page 11
What to Plant.....	Page 13
Keeping the Soil Fertile.....	Page 14
Good Luck.....	Page 17



The essential guerilla gardening kit.

Introduction

Having searched the internet for examples of guerilla gardeners I have found myself disappointed with what I find.

For the vast bulk of documented guerilla gardeners it seems the aim is to restore a piece of urban land to something more appealing. From the planting of flowers to the growing of some veg or herbs, most guerilla gardeners find satisfaction in simply turning an otherwise discarded plot of urban land into something more aesthetic or wildlife friendly. A worthy aim to be sure, and I am not trying to discredit such activities, but given the surge of interest in growing your own food, where are all the guerilla gardeners gardening for self sufficiency?

This booklet is written for those who may wish to take guerilla gardening to the next level to procure the bulk of their food. Is this possible? How much land is needed? What should I grow and how much should I plant? How much time will it take and when do I plant what?

This is an ongoing experiment to find out how self sufficient I can become from guerilla gardening. It represents the second year, and I offer it in the hope that it will be of use to others.

Why Guerilla Garden?

Obviously there is the fact that you want to grow your own food and are prevented from doing so by the various bullshit rules society rams down your throat, which have been pretty much exclusively made to favour the rich landowners who own our arsens. But there are other benefits as well that you may not have thought of.

One year myself and a few friends from a local Transition group decided to guerilla garden a local housing estate. It was a small estate with half a dozen concrete tubs in a state of neglect as well as a large number of shrubs planted by the council against the walls of blocks of flats. In many places these shrubs had died leaving bare earth and a convenient planting space.

The area was duly guerilla gardened. We planted onions, tomatoes, parsley, mint, cauliflower, cabbage and a variety of herbs. The plants were given no attention whatsoever, and yet thrived. Particularly impressive were the large, perfectly formed and delicious cauliflowers that I collected over the summer from the estate. My own efforts on my allotment had frustratingly produced feeble equivalents, despite the extra effort and attention that went into them.

I concluded, rightly or wrongly, that because the soil had not been used for gardening it had built up significant fertility which, on my allotment, has clearly been depleted (probably of some key nutrient), despite my annual mulching

and manuring. This is often a problem with gardening vegetables – the need to constantly input resources to maintain the fertility of the soil. It struck me that if un-planted land was incredibly fertile, then this is the land that should be dug up and planted in order to receive the extra boost in yield that one derives.

I reasoned that in order to enjoy the fruits of this free fertility bounty one would have to garden in different places every year, perhaps leaving any given plot fallow for several years before gardening again in order that nature may restore the fertility.

Thus began my guerilla gardening experiment. My aims, broadly, were:

- 1) To live and provide for myself within the ecosystem in which I lived. (becoming self sufficient in basic produce such as herbs, potatoes and beans)
- 2) To take advantage of the bounty that comes with planting on fertile, undug soil.
- 3) To produce my own food without afflicting damage to the land.
- 4) To increase the diversity and amount of life at the sites I garden.
- 5) To choose sites large enough to accommodate a 3-4 yearly cycle of beds in order to maintain fertility.

You can, of course, get a job, pay rent and bills and procure food and other resources from shops. How we choose to walk upon the earth and experience a life is ours to decide. There is no inherent way for humans to live. There is simply how we choose to live, and the consequences of that choice. The consequences of deciding that the way we should live is to get jobs, work for the industrialists and buy goods and services from large corporations is devastating for the world, its peoples and everything in it. You would probably not be reading this booklet if you did not know this already. We need to live differently, and waiting for change or a miracle revolution to arrive is equivalent to remaining part of the problem.

Thus for me this is not about systems or policies or who to influence. This is personal, it is my existence, and how I choose to live. I want to live without relying on the unnecessary suffering of all the other beings with whom I share existence. That means, certainly at this moment in time, a somewhat precarious existence, but one that is nonetheless richly fulfilling and rewarding.

Digging Your Beds

Time spent at the digging stage will be well rewarded later in the season, so it is worth taking your time and doing it properly.



The digging method: remove the turf to about a spades depth, then dig the subsoil over to about a spades depth (you want the roots to get into the subsoil for minerals). Then you need to prise the soil from the turf with your hands to fill the trench.



About 90% of the fertility of the soil is in the first 5cm, so make sure you are diligent about prising the soil from the clods. After 4 or 5 hours effort (spread over 2 days) you finally have a gorgeous bed, and if its been sunny, a lovely tan to boot.



Next, dig a border around the bed by removing the turf. This helps stop the couch grass from invading the bed. Pile the removed turf up upside down – it will decompose and next year will make great compost to put back on the bed.



Finally, cover the bed with dried grass to prevent it from drying and to give cover for the soil life. It also helps camouflage it to avoid drawing attention.



This pile of stones was dug out of the bed above. They are a pain in the arse cos they make digging much harder work, but it's worth remembering that it is the stones that give the soil its mineral content, without which most life on earth would not be possible, so they give life to us all. Thus is my frustration tempered, and instead of getting mad at them I prefer to make a small cairn in their honour. It also provides a nice place for lizards and spiders to bask in the early sun, as well as a place for me to sit.

Places to Guerilla Garden

I usually bear the following general principles in mind when looking for potential guerilla gardening spots:

1. Is this land a vital local habitat? (say a pristine woodland margin, a lush floodplain meadow or a plant rich verge - I tend to go for grassland, and even then only farm a small section, in order to cause minimum disturbance to any given site)
2. How much sun does the land receive (what orientation is it, how much shade from trees and other obstacles)?
3. Is there enough spare land to enable a patch to be rotated over 3-4 years to maintain fertility naturally?
4. How easy is it to access?
5. What's the likelihood of it being polluted? (semi industrial land, for instance, or busy road side verges)
6. How often is the land accessed by humans (especially those that may take a less than supportive view of you guerilla gardening)?

With that in mind, here are some common examples of where to look for good land around about.

Trainlines

A trip on a train through an urban area in the UK can reveal some otherwise hidden tracts of guerilla gardening. Up and down the country, one can sometimes spot from the train patches of railway land that have been guerilla gardened. Usually, this is where a garden of one house backs onto the railway, and where the persons resident in the house have unofficially extended their garden onto the railway land immediately adjoining their land. It is noteworthy how relatively common this small act of rebellion is.

This gave me my first inspiration. There are vast tracts of railways dotted about the UK. Often there are fairly extensive lands on either side of the railway which are unused by humans (of course one must always be aware that there is no such thing as 'unused' land, or wasteland. All land provides food and habitat for many living beings). A cursory inspection of the train tracks in my own area revealed many useful parcels of land to be guerilla gardened.



A potato plot at the top of a railway embankment. You can see the trainlines below. It was very dry, peaty soil that didn't produce a great crop of spuds.



The same plot covered over with dried grass to protect the soil from drying and to conceal it to avoid attracting attention.

Note: I prefer to choose plots well away from the railway line itself. This not only avoids detection from passing trains and their passengers when I'm on site, but also ensures my safety while I'm busy digging or planting and not paying attention to passing trains.



Another plot this time at the bottom of a railway embankment.

I have not found plots near railway lines to be especially productive, but they are certainly better than nothing. Adding manure and fertiliser would no doubt help get a better crop.

Electricity Substations

Electricity substations often have land around them which makes for good guerilla gardening. This can vary from a small bed to several acres. These are excellent sites, as they are usually infrequently visited, and those that do visit are workers who are wont to turn a blind eye to any vegetable patches that may have sprung up on the grounds. The only downside is that sometimes they are strimmed. An inspection of the ground will answer quickly this question.

If the grounds are strimmed there are still possibilities. A friend has planted fruit bushes on such ground and found that those responsible for strimming leave them be. I have also planted beds of potatoes and found that these too were left. I imagine those responsible for strimming tend to be lowly paid workers who will strim a large number of sites and will not necessarily remember what should and shouldn't be on the grounds or what should and shouldn't be strimmed.

A mile or two from where I live is an electricity substation with several acres of wood and meadow adjoining it which has been used to screen the substation from nearby housing.



Four beds on substation land.

The substation land shown above is a long term project during which I hope to transform the site into a veritable forest garden of Eden, lush with plants and life and food for myself.



Behind the four beds in the previous picture I've dug this area over. The bare earth is where comfrey roots have been planted in order to provide fertiliser for my plots as well as bee food (bees love comfrey). The area in the distance has been planted with fruit bushes and also covered over with cardboard taken from a supermarket recycling bin to keep the weeds down. In the spring it will be planted up with herbs and edible wild plants for both myself and the insects and birds. In this way, we do not just take from the land, but give back as well, and create and sustain more life in the process.

This is my second year working on this particular substation and I was impressed by the harvest. Each bed yielded about 20kg of potatoes, with no fertiliser or maintenance required other than digging the bed, planting the spuds and digging them up again.



Another substation site. I plan to dig 3 potato beds here this year, as well as planting more fruit trees, bushes and comfrey.



The same spot with 5 fruit bushes planted, a large potato bed covered with dried grass and a pile of turf in the foreground for compost next year.

If you plan to go self sufficient this represents a lot of digging, as you'll prob need around 12 potato beds or so. However, you have between October and April to get your digging done. There is little else to do during the winter so it's a good time to get all the digging done so you're ready in spring. I do a couple of hours a few days a week on average during winter, and find this

suffices. It is also good for the soul, so get on with it and stop whingeing about hard work.

You could also re-use the beds year after year, but this presents a fertility problem as we will discuss later.

Mobile Phone Masts

Mobile phone masts often have enclosed land around them that can be guerilla gardened.



Utility Buildings

Utility buildings include telephone exchanges, water utility buildings, and so on. Nobody gives a shit if you garden them, so why not?



Empty Homes

Empty homes not only make good places to squat, but also great places to guerilla garden. No-one is living there, so who's to care? And if you look around you might be lucky and find an empty house replete with large greenhouse and multiple raised beds, just waiting for your attention.



An empty home with a lovely big greenhouse going spare. Guerilla seedlings are being sown and on the opposite side a couple dozen tomato plants were planted.

Next to the greenhouse, several raised beds waiting for your attention. Gorgeous crop of dandelions too.

Some research revealed that the owner of the property above died several years ago and that the estate has since been in legal limbo. This means guaranteed guerilla garden for at least a few years on a prime site with infrastructure. The only downside is the property gets inspected once a week by the estate agents, who also employ a gardening company to infrequently come round to prune and tidy up. This seems to be only a few times a year. So far we have managed to avoid detection and harvest our crops.

To utilise the green house to grow tomatoes and peppers, as well as raise seedlings, we had to hacksaw off the drain pipe fitted to the greenhouse and fit two water barrels to catch the rain needed to water them as the mains had been turned off. This meant needing to visit the site every few days, and more frequently in hot weather, in order to keep the greenhouse watered. Worth it, as a large greenhouse is a real bonus, as one of the difficulties with guerilla gardening is where to raise your seedlings.

Miscellaneous

Council Land

If you look around you'll find plenty of spare council land.



A spare raised bed ready for planting. The council don't do anything with it, and neither do the locals.

Development Land

This example is of a piece of land bought by developers a few years ago but so far left idle. It is land the company bought as an investment as there had been talk of redeveloping the whole area. However, this seems unlikely to ever happen and the land is in such a place that it would be ill fitting for developing unless the wider area development went ahead. And if it does go ahead, it'll not be for a few years and having somewhere to grow for a few years is as good as anything.



One of last year's beds can be seen in the foreground.

It's a few acres in size and is currently meadow. A few of us got together and within a day we had dug several beds. Unfortunately the owner spotted us and came over. We had a chat and he asked us to fuckoff. We'd already dug the plots and planted the spuds so it didn't matter. We came back in the autumn for the harvest.

Parks & Gardens

These are not the best places to plant beds of potatoes or broad beans. However, you can get away with isolated plants such as rhubarb, or merely planting a wide variety of plants scattered amidst the flower beds (strawberry's, for instance). More often than not the gardeners, usually employed by the council, will leave them be, even weeding around them, saving you the bother.

Where there are perennial beds space to grow some perennial herbs can often be found. You may also like to uproot the odd shrub and replace it with a choice fruit bush like blackcurrant, if you are in short supply. Such shenanigans go generally unnoticed.

Allotments, Shared Gardens, etc

Trying to get an allotment will provide the guerilla gardener with a welcome base from which to grow the plants that need a little bit more attention. If you can share someone's allotment as well or instead then that would also increase the amount of land available to you.

Of course, allotments require an annual rent, which is fast on the rise. Whilst this is clearly unreasonable it does provide me with a place where I can grow a wider variety of plants and spend more time creating a lush life giving oasis. So far, it remains a price I have been reluctantly willing to pay.

You can also share someone's garden – many transition groups have some such scheme up and running. There is also Hugh Fearnley's Landshare website (www.landshare.net) which can often turn something up, especially if you are in a populated urban area.

What to Plant

This is gonna be a short chapter, cos it's really down to you. Personally, I find guerilla gardening anything that can't do well left to its own devices to be very time consuming, as you will have many different sites to visit, so for that reason I stick with guerilla gardening the more sturdier, independent and dependable crops. Potatoes, turnips, parsnips, broad beans, cabbage, rhubarb, wheat, oats, barley, fruit bushes, fruit trees, perennial herbs, wild food plants, and so on.

After planting, you can pretty much leave these crops be until the harvest, thus freeing up your time to focus on the places where you have got your more needy vegetables.

So my basic plan is to use my guerilla gardening sites to become self sufficient in potatoes, turnips, parsnips, cabbages, broad beans, wheat, barley, oats and

fruit (apples, pears, plums, damsons, strawberry's, blackcurrants, redcurrants, whitecurrants, gooseberries), along with developing a concentrated population of wild food plants that I utilise (such as bistort). I think this is definitely achievable. The other vegetables I need I intend to grow on my allotment. In time, however, I may be able to go self sufficient on one or two guerilla gardening plots by slowly cultivating some of the larger electricity substations, but this will be done over several years. The downside as well is that all of your eggs will be in one or two baskets, which probably isn't wise.

Keeping the Soil Fertile

A quick look in your average gardening book will reveal the most useless advice imaginable on maintaining fertility – adding compost and muck.

This is useless because a) compost is expensive b) you need a car to transport decent amounts of muck or compost c) you need sites accessible by car and d) you need access to muck and compost. When you read these gardening books and they tell you to add a several inch layer of compost on your bed each year I fall about laughing. Let's get real about gardening, and stop living in this consumerist fantasy world where we can just buy fertility and call it gardening. In the real world, compost is an incredibly valuable treasure, and when you have it you use it wisely and sparingly.

What happens when you don't have it? Well, then you can do as I said earlier, and keep rotating your guerilla gardening plots so that you are not using the same one every year, thereby allowing nature to restore the fertility. The downside to this of course is that you have to dig fresh beds every year. Hard work for most people used to a more sedentary life, but not really a big deal once you get stuck in.

One alternative of course is to make your own compost on site, which you can then use on your beds each year to keep the fertility going. It is difficult to know what to use, so trial and error is the best way. There seems to be little guidance available anywhere on indigenous composting using natural resources, and nothing on the permaculture sites, which suggests to me that they are nowhere near practising what they preach and are still heavily reliant on industrial civilisation and fossil fuels. Given that the average permaculture project requires a veritable blitz of machinery and resources, I think this may indeed be the case.

So I figured that I am on my own on this one, and so began experimenting. What grows on the main sites I use are nettle, couch grass, dock and leaves. With this in mind I have begun developing compost piles of these plants with a view to experimenting on making a good on site compost that can keep my beds fertile. Leaves provide roughage, nettle is an excellent fertiliser and dock has a powerful long, strong root, enabling it to mine the soil for minerals, so I

fancy they are both good plants to use. Couch grass will also add nutrients as well as roughage.

Bracken grows around and about all my sites on nearby hillsides. So I have been gathering dried bracken fronds on the hillsides into piles (they are sharp so I use leather gloves). Once the piles have rotten down I will gather them into old compost bags and transport them by leg power to my guerilla gardening sites. Bracken is rich in potassium, so I reckon another good plant for indigenous compost.

Of course, it also makes sense to plant plants such as comfrey on your sites, rich in nitrogen, which you can add to your compost piles to enrich them. Or just add them directly to your beds as mulch.

For the stealthy guerilla gardener, you can always plunder the surrounding fields for sheep and cow manure, and start a small pile somewhere discreet where it can rot down prior to applying to your beds (add it to your compost heap for example). This should be done at night, else you will incur the wrath of local farmers who will probably then bulldoze your years of guerilla gardening efforts, so take care not to get spotted.



A developing compost heap of dried couch grass and nettle stalks in alternating layers.



A developing leaf pile, covered in sticks to stop it blowing away.

Another option is to make turf piles. These will break down and provide rich compost for next year. I don't like to do this as it is effectively robbing the land of its topsoil, and seems a bit brutal, but if I am digging a bed I generally remove the turf from the edges and this I pile up to use for compost the next year. It goes back on the same plot of so I don't feel like I am robbing the land of nutrients.

Lastly, why not collect your own shit and piss? Piss into a plastic coke bottle or something, using a funnel for accuracy. Take these down to your various

guerilla compost heaps and pour them on. It'll make a big difference – your piss is like a magical compost enricher and the piles will break down much faster. Collect your friends piss as well. If you are squeamish about carrying bottles of piss about, get over it. Utilise everything. Utilise your own shit if you can – see below for ideas.



Liquid gold. Easily mistaken for beer by the unwary visitor.

Recommended reading: *Liquid Gold: The Lore and Logic of Using Urine to Grow Plants* by Carol Steinfeld and Malcolm Wells. Another good one is *Humanure Handbook: A Guide to Composting Human Manure* by Joseph Jenkins.



A DIY compost toilet for poo only – pee goes in the bottle. I put the bucket in a rucksack when it is full and take it down to one of my guerrilla sites where I have a pile of humanure. I put paper inside the bucket to avoid having to wash skidmarks off the sides. I burn the paper on site with a lighter when I empty the bucket so it doesn't blow away. The compost bag on the right contains wood chippings and sawdust – every time you take a dump sprinkle this over the resultant treasure and there will be no odour.



Look around in parks, woods and verges. Authorities are always chainsawing trees so sawdust and woodchip for your compost loo is easy to find and collect in old compost bags.



A turf pile will break down to make rich compost the following year.

Good Luck

I wrote this to inspire others to experiment and take guerilla gardening to the next level. Too many people, domesticated anarchists included, think they have to buy land to become self sufficient, when the reality is they have chosen the easy path, and sold out, because anything is possible. Do you see the squirrels or the pigeons buying land to live? No, so why can't humans be equally inventive in how they get their food? Be cunning, and creative, and the earth will provide for you regardless of where you live. Remember that you are an animal, a powerful animal, and that is the very bedrock of your being, without which you would be nothing. Get in touch with and honour this aspect of yourself, and all things become possible.

If you decide to take up the adventure, let me know how it goes: countryside-anarchist@countryside-anarchist.co.uk.

Good luck.



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