



Guerrilla Gardeners Plant the Seeds of Change

by Sheri Radford / May 6, 2022

In honour of the recent International Sunflower Guerrilla Gardening Day on May 1, we present an introduction to unauthorized gardening

The first [International Sunflower Guerrilla Gardening Day](#) took place in Brussels, Belgium, back in 2007. The group of friends who decided to embark upon this unsanctioned horticultural mission chose the sunflower for several reasons, outlined in their [manifesto](#).

Sunflowers grow easily in temperate climates, requiring little water and leaving the soil unharmed. Sunflower seeds are inexpensive and don't require any special knowledge to plant. A single mature flower can produce hundreds of seeds. People can consume sunflower seeds and sunflower oil, and the oil can also be used as biofuel. Plus, the large flowers are a cheerful yellow, and young sunflowers shift throughout the day to follow the sun—an apt metaphor for seeking the positive in life.

But guerrilla gardening isn't restricted to one day a year, nor is it limited to sunflowers. Every single day, people around the world cultivate land that they don't own, for reasons ranging from enhancing beauty in neglected areas to growing fresh produce in food deserts (areas where few stores sell affordable, nutritious food). These determined horticulturists don't ask for permission before transforming derelict public parks and litter-covered highway shoulders into green spaces filled with flowers, fruits or veggies.



Photo by Julian Hochgesang on Unsplash

In the 1970s, artist Liz Christy and other gardening activists calling themselves the [Green Guerrillas](#) started tossing “seed grenades” and planting flowers to beautify vacant lots, centre meridians and abandoned buildings throughout New York City. The group is often credited with starting the community garden movement and popularizing the concept of guerrilla gardening, and their work in urban agriculture and food justice continues to this day.

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“Gangsta gardener” [Ron Finley](#) began guerrilla gardening in 2010 when, tired of living in a food desert, he planted sunflowers, pumpkin, kale and more on a strip of land between the street and his house in South Central Los Angeles. The city promptly issued a citation ordering him to remove the illegal garden. He fought to get the law changed—and won.

“Gardening is the most therapeutic and defiant act you can do, especially in the inner city,” Finley said in his [2013 TED Talk](#), which has been viewed 4.2 million times. “I beautify lawns, parkways. I use the garden, the soil, like it’s a piece of cloth, and the plants and the trees, that’s my embellishment for that cloth. You’d be surprised what the soil could do if you let it be your canvas. You just couldn’t imagine how amazing a sunflower is and how it affects people.” He explained, “We gotta flip the script on what a gangsta is. If you ain’t a gardener, you ain’t gangsta. Get gangsta with your shovel, okay? And let that be your weapon of choice.”

People like Liz Christy and Ron Finley have inspired countless others to grab a trowel and start making a difference in their own neighbourhoods. Andrea Giordani is one such person. When he started guerrilla gardening 12 years ago, it was with the simple intention of beautifying his small village in Northern Italy. “My guerrilla gardening has never been an act of protest,” he said. Giordani went from being called “the weirdo with the watering can” to making true connections with the residents of his town, inspiring them to pick up trash and to plant flowers and trees, and building a strong sense of community along the way.



Photo by Jonathan Kemper on Unsplash

Feeling inspired to begin bewildering? That’s what guerrilla gardening is sometimes called, along with activist, sneaky or subversive gardening.

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The first step is to choose a neglected piece of land that is easy for you to monitor. Then select native plants—no invasive species—that are hardy and require little watering. Be prepared to get fined or possibly even arrested for your act of civil disobedience. And don’t be upset if the food or flowers you grow get stolen. Such is the nature of unsanctioned gardening in public spaces.

But also don’t be surprised if you happen to discover a likeminded community of gardeners, botanists, environmentalists and activists who support your endeavour and want to get their hands dirty, too.

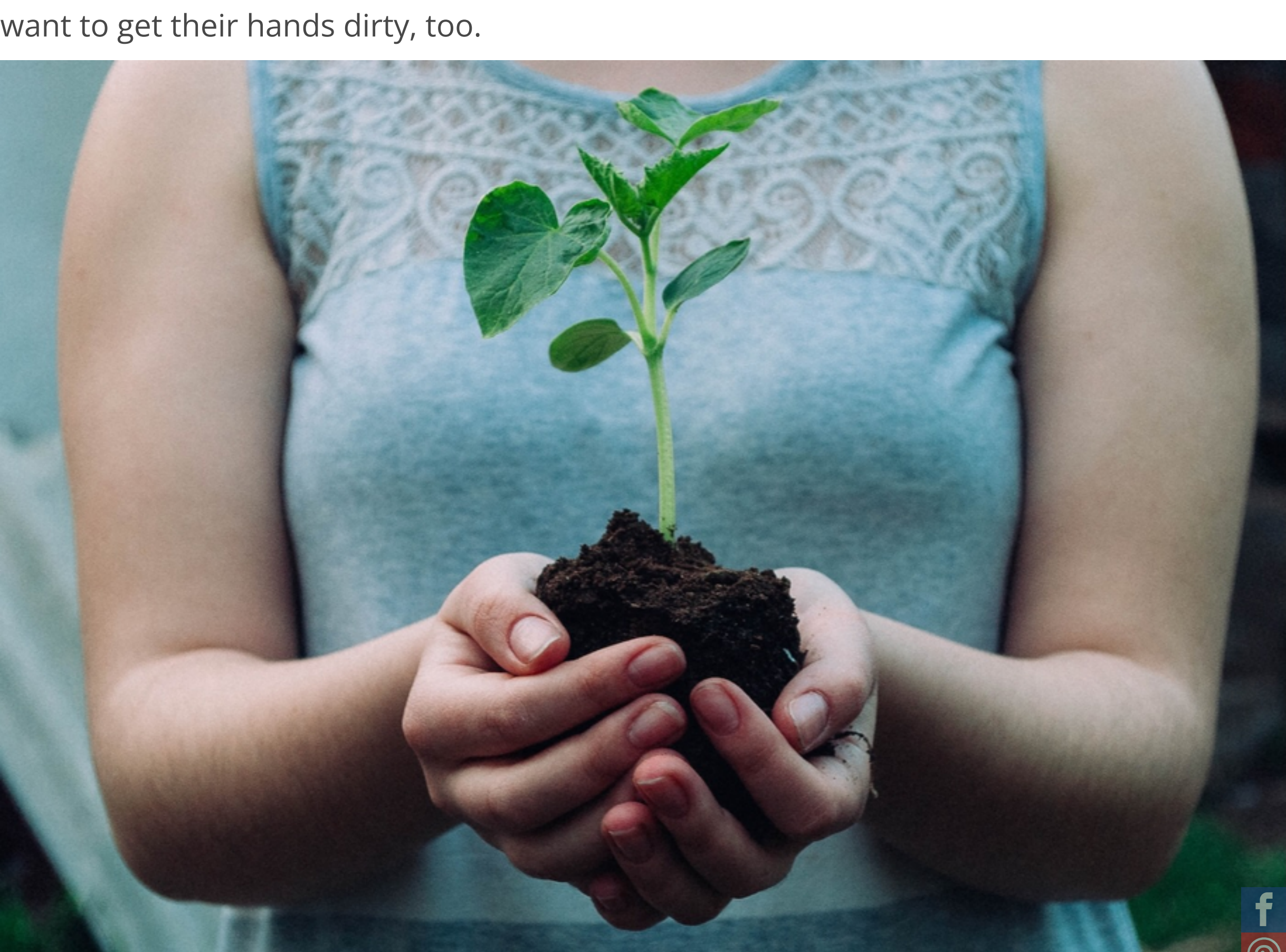


Photo by Nikola Jovanovic on Unsplash

Further reading

[Richard Reynolds](#) quite literally wrote the book on this topic. [On Guerrilla Gardening: The Why, What, and How of Cultivating Neglected Public Space](#) covers the history of the movement, and includes helpful tips on topics such as what to grow and how to deal with bad environmental conditions.

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