# Chapter 4
# On the Ground with Guerrillas: An Ethnographical Reflection

**Abstract** There is little academic exploration of guerrilla gardening: existing accounts are often distanced or only provide a short glimpse into the activities of those who colonise land without permission. Whilst there are few academic accounts of guerrilla gardeners generally, there are even fewer which concentrate on those who pursue the activity of growing food in cities. Within this chapter, we focus on the exploits of F Troop, the Women's Group and a solo guerrilla gardening, three distinctly different 'types' of guerrilla groups, each pursuing the idea of Urban Agriculture (UA). In each instance, we provide an in-depth account of our actions 'on the ground' with the three guerrilla groups, enabling the reader to see how action is carried out and for what purpose. We also analyse existing legislation to determine whether their actions are in fact 'illegal' or something else entirely. Finally, we reflect on the guerrilla practices and analyse the three in relation to the wider movement.

## Researching Guerrilla Gardeners

The previous chapters have set the groundwork, providing an overview of UA and particularly those guerrilla gardeners who practise this activity. Within this chapter we aim to ground this in specific case study examples. In doing so, we demonstrate the wide spectrum of activities involved in guerrilla gardening, from rebellious middle-class actors colonising dual-carriageway verges to some who could be considered working class, acquiring land for an unpermitted community garden. The chapter begins with a summary of the research approach adopted, before providing a narrative of the groups and ultimately an analysis of their actions.

This chapter prepares the ground for further exploration in the latter part of the book: using the case studies to illustrate issues around guerrilla gardening. In doing so, we hope to highlight an aspect of the activity which has not previously been explored in any detail, revealing practices otherwise cloaked.

We were conscious that few academic studies had interacted with these actors in a detailed and personal manner, instead tending to use techniques which distanced the researchers from the activity. With this in mind, ethnography influenced large parts of this study, which entailed spending considerable amounts of time in



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the field with the guerrilla gardeners. The research strategy involved employing observation methods, alongside interviews with both guerrilla gardeners and those who lived, worked and otherwise used the areas surrounding their sites: in a sense going one step further and investigating the 'impact' of this activity on those closest to the spaces. Few studies have investigated guerrilla gardening objectively, let alone attempted to liaise with the surrounding residents, workers and other users of the areas affected by the gardening activity.

Perhaps most closely aligned to this study on guerrilla gardening is the paper by Crane et al. (2012) on unlawful food cultivators in Canada, discussed in Chap. 3. Their approach differs significantly, with the principal researcher (Crane) adopting a participant action research role, attempting to provide a voice for the guerrilla gardeners (herself and friends) to demonstrate the effectiveness of their action. In this piece, she adopts a participant role and *is* a guerrilla gardener: and not just *a* gardener but the leader of the troop. This creates a problematic dichotomy with the author acting as both a research subject and researcher (Crane 2011; Crane et al. 2012). It could be argued that portions of action research could have been considered appropriate in this study on guerrilla gardening. However, it is not the aim of the present study to improve, or otherwise directly impact on, the practice of guerrilla gardening. Instead we aim to explore what the guerrillas do, their motives for engaging in this type of activity and the impact on neighbouring residents and users. We therefore argue that an alternative research approach, relying on observation and abstraction, is better suited to this study, allowing the researcher to witness the activities of these individuals on the ground, without direct interference, and thus provide a more impartial assessment of the activity, outcome and impact.

The largest obstacle to any research using these intimate approaches is gaining admission to groups; this is especially pertinent with guerrilla gardening. Simply tracking down those practising the activity can take a considerable amount of time, and, once found, some guerrilla gardeners may be reluctant to partake in any research activity for a variety of reasons, not least that they may fear being unmasked (see, for instance, Hardman 2009). It was, therefore, important that early research efforts concentrated on gaining this access, since this was often the most difficult part of the observation process (Jorgensen 1989). From previous experience, it was evident that Reynolds's guerrillagardening.org was a valuable resource to exploit, aiding with making initial connections with some groups. Nevertheless, the rise of social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, has resulted in several groups adopting these tools instead of the guerrilla gardening forum; as these sites have advanced security features, such as keeping groups private, there is a substantial impact on the research effort.

The field research was undertaken in 2010–2012 and encountered three examples of guerrilla gardening, two of which were sourced through social media and the guerrilla gardening forum, whilst one was found through word of mouth. We now proceed to provide an overview of these guerrilla groups before questioning legal issues around the activity.

## *F Troop: Rebellious Employees of a Local Authority*

Following a period of searching online, a female eventually responded on the guerrillagardening.org forum after a direct message. She identified herself as an individual who was just starting a group, which at this point did not have a name. Subsequent interactions discovered that they called themselves 'F Troop': a name chosen to reflect the 'messy' and somewhat chaotic thinking behind the group's actions. The leader, a part-time horticulturalist named Sarah,[1] likened the actions of the group to that of an American Western television series called 'F Troop', in which cowboys would gallivant into action without a second thought. The name F Troop was adopted with enthusiasm by the other guerrillas, who later reminisced at some length about the series from which they acquired the name.

The group, who more commonly term themselves a 'troop', operated in the Midlands region and comprised a mix of males and females from their mid-30s to early 40s (Fig. 4.1). The unusual, yet interesting, issue with these individuals was that the group was formed entirely of local authority employees: by day they worked from a city-centre office and on weekends or evenings the group operated on authority-owned land without permission. Due to the nature of their 'day jobs', it was vital that, as researchers, we acted ethically in order to keep the identities of

**Fig. 4.1** Hardman with F Troop members in 2010: guerrilla action in small-scale sites, difficult to access, at dusk (Reproduced with permission from Sarah, F Troop's leader)

[1] The guerrilla gardeners have allowed their first names to be used throughout this book.

the individuals secure. We became conscious that, by exposing the city in which the guerrillas operated, the local authority (their employer) could perhaps be made aware of the activity and possibly the identity of the guerrillas. In order to prevent this, we refer to the region – the Midlands – as opposed to the precise city locale within which the group operated. The Midlands region incorporates a large number of cities, and thus, it would be particularly difficult for a reader to identify the exact location of the troop.

## *The Women's Group*

It quickly became apparent that Reynolds' website had encountered a slump in activity in early 2010, with little recorded in the Midlands. The decision was therefore taken to alter the initial focus, which had been wholly on illegal activity, and to incorporate a legal scheme, allowing a comparison of unregulated and regulated UA. A community garden, established by a Women's Group (WG) had been formed recently in a Midlands city, and the group was willing to be involved with the research. Ironically, after a few observations and interactions, it became apparent that the women had created the community garden without seeking the appropriate permission and thus were arguably practising a form of guerrilla gardening: consciously colonising land and attempting to mask their unpermitted activities. With this realisation in mind, it was vital that this group was treated in the same manner, in terms of protecting identities and location, as was F Troop.

The WG cultivated a small 'community garden' to the rear of a community centre (see Fig. 4.2) and held fortnightly lunches to which local residents and organisations were invited. This was the only occasion when all group members were together and active. Mon, a community worker assigned to the nearby community centre headed the WG; she was effectively the 'glue' that bound the members together. The group had around eight members, although the number and membership was ever-changing, evolving and growing throughout the research period.

**Fig. 4.2** Development of the Women's Group community garden; from the initial plot digging on the left in 2010 to the beds on the right in 2012 (Hardman's photographs)

This community garden was initially partially funded by a local health trust, which provided training for the WG members along with a few plants and initial guidance to get the group started. The funding was allocated to help the WG promote healthy eating amongst the local residents. Funding also stretched to cover the cost of a fortnightly 'community lunch', providing residents with fresh produce from the community garden in return for small donations, although residents were not compelled to make such donations. However, the local trust's financial support abruptly ended in early 2011, resulting in the scheme reverting to self-funding status. The WG was forced to search for other avenues of income to support its work and the development of the space.

## *The Solo Guerrilla Gardener*

In the early stages of the research, an opportunity arose via the guerrillagardening.org forum: contact was made with a solo guerrilla gardener who appeared reasonably active and was eager to speak about her experiences. She was an elderly lady who operated in the Midlands region; her aim was to create a network of small-scale edible corridors, by transforming neglected alleyways providing side and rear access to an area of local authority terraced housing. Figure 4.3 demonstrates the extent of her action: peas, beans, tomatoes, lettuce and a variety of herbs are positioned along the space.

**Fig. 4.3** The solo guerrilla gardener's alleyway, transformed for UA (Hardman's photograph)

Unlike the members of the other two guerrilla groups, the solo guerrilla was only willing to be involved in minimal amounts of research: this was due to a combination of factors, from the close location of her home in relation to the site to her wish that the research team avoided speaking with her neighbours. The latter was due to her experience of previous conflict, explored later in this chapter, in which a neighbour displayed significant anger about her actions. Although only used as a pilot during the present project, the data gathered still provides an insight into another form of guerrilla practice, in this case the activity of an individual, as distinct from that of a group.

## A First-Hand Personal Reflection: Interacting with Guerrillas on the Ground

Whilst this chapter has explored the book, its outputs and addition to knowledge on UA, guerrilla gardening and a variety of other areas, it has yet to fully explore the research journey. This study involved large amounts of time in the field, networking with guerrillas, UA activists and a whole host of other actors. This journey is arguably more active, and potentially dangerous, than some studies, involving complex ethical dilemmas and considerable personal pressure: in this section, we wish to reflect on Hardman's experiences in the field.

The digs with F Troop were perhaps the largest and most demanding activities during my research. These presented a unique challenge, prompting me to engage with strangers – who all knew each other before the digs. Essentially, I had to break into an already-established network of relatively close friends. I would then watch, and record, whilst these friends cultivated patches of land in an immensely busy city centre. I knew that this tactic was problematic, and perhaps dangerous, in the sense that it attracted huge amounts of attention, with passers-by stopping to take photographs and look from afar at what was going on. I was extremely surprised not to see the police intervene or show any interest throughout any of the five phases.

Perhaps the second-largest challenge was my attendance at the WG events. In a similar manner to my interactions with F Troop, I had to embed myself in a community which had been together for some time; unlike the former guerrilla group, these individuals had known each other for years and had a long history together. I had witnessed, many times, and recorded throughout my field notes how those not favoured or in a certain clique were excluded from most events. Fortunately Mon, the leader of the WG, took a liking to me and my demeanour: how I constantly wanted to help out and 'lend a hand' in the kitchen. This was not a false persona, as I genuinely had a bond with the WG members and nearby community. This bond enabled me to work with them, in a relatively trouble-free fashion, over the 19-month period.

I have to admit that I was a little disappointed not to interact with the solo guerrilla gardener on a more meaningful level. Despite this slight drawback, she was extremely welcoming and willing to provide information. I feel I was extremely lucky to meet three sets of guerrilla gardeners who were at the beginning of their action and so willing to be involved. Whilst I had to be critical at times, I regard these individuals as friends and truly feel touched to experience this action alongside them.

I urge future researchers, interested in guerrilla gardening and UA, either as isolated concepts or a study with both included, to adopt a similar range of techniques as those shown through this study. In a similar manner to other urban-centric acts, guerrilla gardening has both a positive and negative side, depending on the group, their ambitions and actual actions. An observational approach allows the researcher, in a similar situation to mine, to establish a more clear view of the action, a particular viewpoint which has, until now, not been explored in depth. There is much to explore in this area and more to find out; there is an opportunity here to be a front runner and an opportunity to make a difference.

## Is Guerrilla Gardening Illegal?

An important consideration which needed to be explored fully before any research took place was the fuzzy nature of guerrilla activity: is it 'illegal' or something which is merely discouraged by authority? Since the activities explored in this research occurred in the UK, we focus now on exploring this issue, which is often raised around research into guerrilla gardening, in the context of the UK legal system. Since the guerrillas are interacting with land, which is a form of property, the Theft Act 1968 formed the underpinning of defining the legality of their actions. Section 4 of the Act begins by explaining what property is: 'property includes money and all other property, real or personal, including things in action and other intangible property' (Theft Act 1968, s 1). In these terms the guerrillas clearly appear to be interacting with someone else's property and may therefore be breaking the law:

> A person who picks mushrooms growing wild on any land, or who picks flowers, fruit or foliage from a plant growing wild on any land, does not (although not in possession of the land) steal what he picks, unless he does it for reward or for sale or other commercial purpose. Theft Act (1968, s 3)

The Act also defines what cannot be classed as property: in particular it explains that 'a person cannot steal land, or things forming part of land' (Theft Act 1968, s 2). Both sections 2 and 3 thus demonstrate that wild foliage and plants growing on land are not classed as property. Although this initially may clear the guerrillas from accusations of both criminal damage and theft, a more thorough exploration of the 2 reveals that a person cannot steal land unless he/she is 'severing it or causing it to be severed'(Theft Act 1968, s 2). If the guerrillas are ripping up the existing

vegetation and replacing them – digging the soil and taking the vegetation's roots – then they would appear to be committing a criminal act by 'severing' the land owner's property.

Guerrillas often argue that they merely beautify empty space (McKay 2011) although, in stark contrast, the land owners and other authorities may consider it a criminal act: nevertheless, most of the time those in authority turn a supportive blind eye (*Irish Times* 2009). There is often confusion over ownership of the land being altered, but one has to be conscious that the land will be someone's property (Leopold 1997). There may not be a clear law condemning what the guerrilla gardeners are doing (as explained above), and guerrillas make it clear that police and authorities have little power to stop their action (Reynolds 2008, 2009), whilst several online videos back up these claims.

In conclusion, therefore, the existing UK law is 'fuzzy' in the context of guerrilla gardening activity, and, whilst not directly advocating their action, as a researcher and not an activist, it is perfectly ethical and legal to observe and interact with the guerrillas. Even so, it is important still to bear in mind that boundaries exist and, as a representative of a research organisation (in this case a university), it would be advisable to keep interaction to a minimum.

## *The Researcher's Role: Conflict of Interest?*

Perhaps one of the largest conflicts of interest arises with Hardman's position as the field researcher. It must be noted that during elements of this research Hardman was a member of the West Midlands Police (WMP) Special Constabulary: a volunteer Police Officer with the power of a constable (WMP 2012). Evidently, working for an organisation which could jeopardise the position of the guerrilla gardeners potentially produces a large conflict of interest which could inevitably impact on the study (Stake 2010).

Nevertheless, during the initial portions of the field data collection Hardman was training and thus not fully warranted. It could be argued that even though the author was not a warranted officer at the time of parts of the data collection and thus was an 'ordinary citizen', this training position within WMP would surely impact on one's views of the guerrilla gardeners and possibly the research subjects' behaviour. For instance, there are numerous authors, such as Glaser and Strauss (1967), Pascale (2010) and others, who comment on the danger of entering the field with preconceptions, and in this context one could question whether the WMP training could taint the field researcher's observations and actions in the field.

Yet as will be made clear throughout this book, whilst some guerrilla gardening actions may constitute criminal damage or theft, the actions of those reviewed during this research did not cross any criminal boundary: the comprehensive ethical guidelines followed during this research ensured that the field researcher would never be exposed to illegal activities. Regardless of this, Hardman notified both the guerrilla gardeners being observed and his Special Constabulary line

manager of the research: numerous comical remarks were often made, but again due to the noncriminal nature of the action, all parties were happy for the research to continue.

## Interacting with the Guerrillas: An Ethnographic Reflection on the Action

Something we have mentioned repeatedly throughout this book is the lack of detailed interaction with guerrilla gardeners. Throughout our time with F Troop, the WG and solo guerrilla, we sought to provide this detail: opting for an ethnographic approach enabled us to become part of the groups and report from within. In doing so, we were able to gather data on their everyday practices and, through the use of both informal and formal interviews, explore their reasons for such action. In this section, we wish to reflect on two of these detailed experiences, providing a chronological overview of our work with F Troop and the WG. With the solo guerrilla gardener, since she was an individual and lived next to her guerrilla project, this work was even more sporadic and is thus difficult to review in the same manner. Through this section, we hope to highlight how the guerrilla gardeners went about their actions. We also wish to review our position as researchers engaging with guerrillas in the hope that this will encourage more investigation of the activity. We begin with an overview of F Troop's journey before then continuing with a reflection on the WG's antics.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, and the next, we use first person to provide the reader with a great sense of the action. Hardman was the field researcher and so the reflections derive from his account: through adopting such an approach, we hope to highlight how guerrillas act on the ground, the differences in their practices and the produce they cultivate. Chapter 5, an analysis of their actions, proceeds to adopt first person too, before we shift back to the more 'traditional' format for the remaining chapters.

### *F Troop*

I demonstrate, throughout my field notes, how F Troop refers to the digs as 'phases'. The term 'phase' was used before I even met with the troop in the field, thus demonstrating their desire to create multiple sites for possible UA. I witnessed five phases in total, which occurred along this barrier (Fig. 4.4). Each phase attracted different actors and tackled certain pieces of the land which ran along the route featured in Fig. 4.4. Whilst the picture in Fig. 4.4 is rather basic, unlike a map created via specialised software, for instance, it provides a greater sense of place and the messiness of the environment in which F Troop performed.

Evidently, there were dangers with working along this barrier; passing traffic was perhaps the largest threat present: cars would speed by me at over 50 mph and with the walkway being rather thin, it was imperative that I, and other group members,

watched our positioning. Safety was paramount, especially when engaging in such risky environment (Reynolds 2008; Wagenaar 2011). Whilst a high-visibility vest or a similar safety feature would usually be used in this situation (Hart 2005), on this occasion, due to the underground nature of the action, I was unable to use any extra equipment: relying more on my positioning and awareness skills.

Consideration also had to be taken with regard to visibility, particularly since guerrilla gardeners attempt to remain covert, unnoticed and thus undisturbed (Flores 2006; Lewis 2012). One could argue that my presence alongside such a group of individuals, who were tampering with land without permission, would give the impression that I was aiding with their action; it would be difficult to prove otherwise. Thus, in a similar manner to the guerrilla gardeners, I was aware of the implications of being caught in the act. Figure 4.4 illustrates two of my main concerns: the CCTV system, positioned opposite the dig sites, and the pub, where patrons would gather

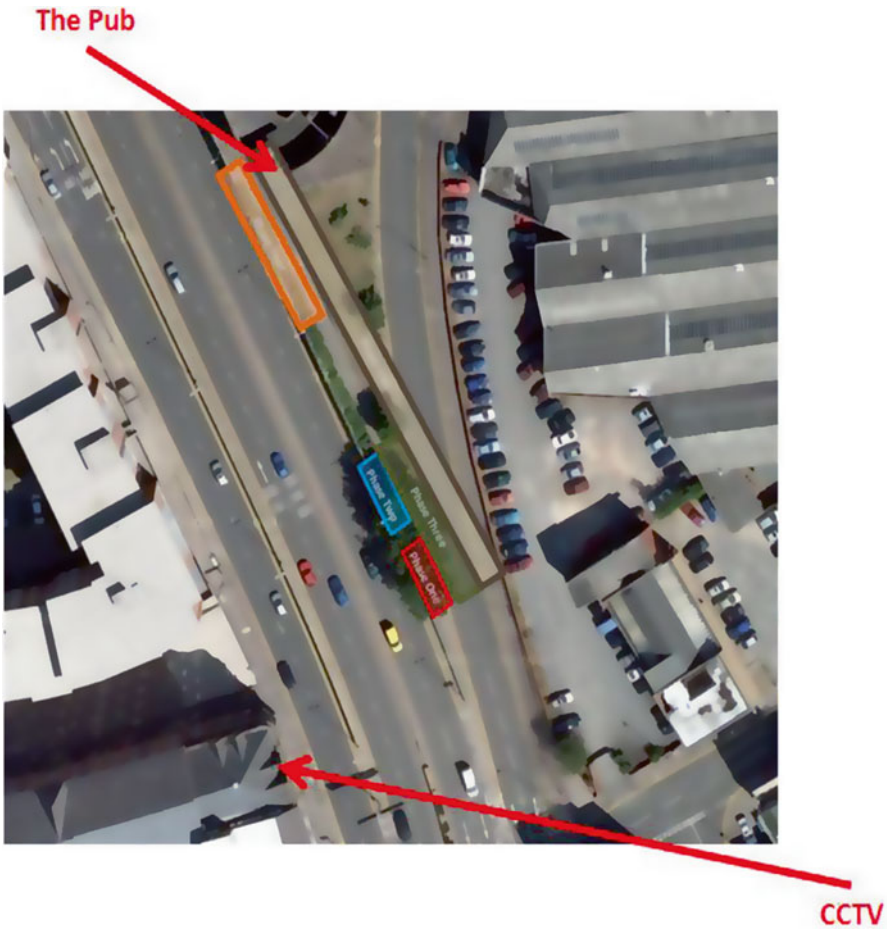


**Fig. 4.4** The area in which F Troop 'performed' (Map data copyright of Google 2014, Bluesky)

outside for regular cigarette breaks. It was also vital to take into account passing pedestrians and vehicles, who may question or attempt to intervene with the action (Reynolds 2008).

This following section explores the five phases in detail, focussing particularly on the UA aspect of the troop. The chronological overview of each phase allows one to appreciate the development of the troop's ideas and how they managed the spaces, cultivating produce in what is a very busy area of this Midlands city. I utilise direct extracts from my field notes to present a raw account of the action and, as far as can be deduced, the thought processes of those involved.

### Phase One: Considering the Possibility for UA

The first phase occurred on the 21st May 2010, on a relatively sunny day. I noticed that the group had opted to operate in broad daylight and on a busy junction; they were in complete view of passing vehicles and pedestrians. Traffic lights were situated adjacent to where the majority of the phase one dig took place. I met with group members on the site, who were already starting to decide on the specific area on which to concentrate. I noticed that each member brought tools and an array of foliage: from sunflowers and spades to pitchforks and manure, the sheer amount of items in their possession ensured that the group was highly noticeable.

**Box 4.1: An Extract from My Phase One Field Notes**
I'm initially greeted by three individuals, two females and one male. The group wait for later arrivals, which soon turn up (albeit 10 min later than the planned time). The new arrivals (one female and one male) come equipped with spades, rakes and extra plants. It's immediately apparent that some group members have thought about what they want to do. They've already 'scouted' the site, creating a basic diagram of where it lies. We set off to the phase one dig site which is located near to a set of busy traffic lights.

My field recordings for this phase demonstrate that attendance was reasonably high at this guerrilla dig (Box 4.1). Interestingly, this caption highlights how some of the group have pre-planned ambitions for the site, whilst others have been excluded from this process. I developed the feeling that, although most attendees had some form of horticultural experience, the vegetation brought along was a last-minute thought; there was no organisation to the event and everything appeared rather chaotic. This somewhat unstructured approach was humorously captured in the name of the group: 'F Troop'. The name was chosen almost immediately, on recommendation by one of the guerrillas who had a keen interest in the arts: he appeared creative and more interested in the aesthetic improvement of the space.

My passive role, although it involved standing back from the action, still enabled me to be part of this discussion. Perhaps the most interesting of these discussions was evoked by some members when they suggested the idea of planting crops. The initial discussion is primarily led by the organiser of F Troop, Sarah, a horticulturalist who appeared ambitious with her plans to utilise the space. Sarah was interested in using the space for innovative practices, including the cultivation of crops. This was of particular interest, since I have previously noted that not many guerrilla gardening troops opt to perform UA, instead preferring to adopt and plant less intensive vegetation; obviously, a simple array of greenery would require less maintenance, whereas vegetables usually require a lot of care and attention.

The main argument for vegetables appeared to originate from the leader, the female named Sarah, with whom I had originally liaised via Reynolds's site: guerrillagardening.org. Sarah was the founding member of the troop; she brought everyone together and directed the proceedings: it became clear that she was the centre of the troop and the others followed. This leader directed the food discussions and, with her enthusiasm for the idea, appeared to convince other troop members to back the notion of planting crops. Her suggestion was backed up by her close friend, Anna, who acted as a 'second lieutenant' throughout the process: reinforcing the leader's views and guiding other less experienced guerrillas.

Sarah, who holds most of the knowledge, was clearly conscious of the UA concept. She regularly acknowledged schemes in North America, and speaks of the 'Green Guerillas' (see Chap. 3), particularly about their achievements with sites. Her ambitions continually influence the other troop members and their thinking, which in turn manipulates the troop's direction. Sarah was determined to practise the art of vegetable growing in the city, perhaps fuelled by her keenness to display her talents in the harsh environment in which F Troop practised, attempting to prove that her skills were able to tackle such a desolate place.

Although there was extensive discussion on the topic of producing food in the patch, in this initial phase, the group opted to merely rejuvenate the space through the planting of bulbs and pre-prepared pots of flowers. Members initially concentrated on clearing the land (Fig. 4.5), which has gained a substantial amount of debris over the years. They resort to utilising a large bag of manure before planting the various plants and seeds.

This dig lasted for around two and a half hours, before eventually concluding with a clear-up of the site; members swept the pavement, ensuring that all traces of manure or topsoil were cleared from the area. The troop, evidently excited by their first successful venture, continued to discuss the options available by using the site to grow food. Interestingly, I note how plans were discussed for a phase two: a patch located adjacent to the phase one site; however, in this instance the patch would be used for the cultivation of vegetables.

### Phase Two: The Nasturtium Display

Phase two occurred on the 1st July 2010, a little over a month after the May dig. The participant numbers, in comparison to the first dig, dropped considerably, with only a couple of individuals from phase one present. In a similar manner to phase one, a

**Fig. 4.5** F Troop clearing the land during phase one (Hardman's photograph)

process appeared to be played out by F Troop; this is demonstrated in Box 4.2, an extract from my field notes. Planning was tackled on-site, with decisions made instantly using the vegetation available.

**Box 4.2: An Extract from My Phase Two Field Notes**
Discussion is focussed and centres on the tasks to be completed, these are identified before anything takes place:

1. Break ground
2. Turn soil
3. Organise arrangement by putting pots on intended planting spot
4. Plant
5. Clean up and head to the pub

This process was closely coordinated by Sarah yet again, who surveyed the planting plan before permitting guerrillas to dig and insert the various seeds, bulbs and pre-potted vegetation. On occasion, Sarah asked for my opinion on the display, attempting to engage with another's perspective to gain maximum impact from the space. Yet she refrained from asking others directly: those who were, in essence, involved more thoroughly in the process. I often felt that Sarah presumed that I was an expert and may not fully understand the basis for the research being undertaken.

**Fig. 4.6** The Troop's display with nasturtiums (Hardman's photograph)

Nevertheless, I did attempt to address this issue through our conversations, to ensure that the group members were comfortable with my research focus and presence on-site.

In phase two, my field notes reveal that the troop propels the idea of UA from abstract to reality by experimenting with the land and planting a few low-key edible flowers (Fig. 4.6). Sarah brings along some nasturtiums, she then provided an overview of this particular form of vegetation to me, since I was not aware of its edibility: 'add the flowers and leaves to salads and they have a peppery taste' (Sarah). This is the first form of evidence to suggest that F Troop was interested in adding productive vegetation to the landscape; considering how it would survive in the harsh climate. Sarah was conscious of its purpose and brought the flowers along to see how they would cope in the plot.

However, the ambitious plans discussed in the latter stages of phase one appeared to have been replaced in favour of a less adventurous approach with the nasturtiums. The troop, with the direction of Sarah, again reached a consensus: they claimed that this produce would not be edible, due to the poor soil conditions in which it was planted. Rather, the troop members discussed, at length, the reasoning behind the proposed addition of more recognisable vegetables to the land; eventually they agreed that their efforts were symbolic: demonstrating that the vegetables can be cultivated and survive in the urban environment. They proceeded to discuss the dangers with growing food next to such a busy road. The main danger they identified involved the possibility of pollution, particularly from passing vehicles, which could have resulted in the soil being contaminated.

One could question whether the use of nasturtium is even a form of UA; this flower takes the centrepiece of phase two, with other plants surrounding the nasturtiums. However, regardless of its visibility, my notes demonstrated that there were few attempts by the troop members to warn passers-by or the local community that the flower might not be safe to eat. The troop has a minimal amount of interaction with those who pass the site or those who reside nearby. They opt to remain in a tight-knit cluster, apparently not welcoming involvement with others, which inevitably leads to those who pay interest in the site being unable to discuss the action with troop members. This lack of interaction, which will be discussed in greater detail in a subsequent chapter, results in the failure to warn about the potential edibility (or otherwise) of the produce.

### Phase Three: Planting Vegetables and Rejuvenating the Sites

The next visit to the site occurred 7 months following the previous dig, on the 3rd February 2011. The third dig was organised in the same fashion as the previous two, with Sarah sending out e-mails in preparation for a meeting at the site. The aim appeared to revolve around the re-establishment of plots, with a specific focus on the two previous dig sites, maintenance and further vegetation to be added. Interestingly, I noted how the attendance was the largest so far during this dig, with five females and one male at the site.

It became immediately apparent that the 7-month duration between digs, and the lack of maintenance throughout the winter months, had resulted in the plants succumbing to the weather; and some, of course, had been annuals. I noticed that the vegetation that once existed on the two patches was either trodden on by passers-by or had died due to insufficient nutrition (Fig. 4.7); litter and weeds again covered the area, and there was little evidence of F Troop's previous attempts to improve the space. Figure 4.7 demonstrates the devastating effect of the lengthy period between digs, with the site quickly reverting back to its former dilapidated state.

However, I noted that F Troop was still keen to exhibit its food growing skills. Sarah brought along several types of vegetation, including seeds for herbs and some pregrown vegetables: spinach and peas were to be introduced during this phase. The phase three notes, particularly the extract in Box 4.3, highlight the progress the troop has made with their ambition for growing crops next to the dual carriageway.

**Box 4.3: An Extract from Phase Three Field Notes**

The leader of the troop has brought peas and spinach to experiment on the land. Other members have brought plants to rejuvenate the area. Nasturtiums also make an appearance again, with one particular member bringing several bags of seeds. The leader suggested before the dig that troop members bring bulbs as opposed to seeds, this call was obviously ignored.

**Fig. 4.7** The site before phase three's action (Hardman's photograph)

I noticed how Sarah also coordinated the planting of the crops: 'The peas should go against the wall. They'll be noticed more there' (Sarah). I suspect this was to gain more notice for this particular form of vegetation, whilst other flowers, including the new nasturtiums, were planted in front of the vegetables. The vegetables would clearly be highlighted by being positioned directly in front of the grey concrete barrier backdrop; they had a prominent position within the display. These were then quite heavily watered and admired by the two females.

Figure 4.8 shows the two females, Sarah and Anna, in action – digging the soil ready for the vegetables to be planted: it provides an insight into the fairly everyday practices of the group, particularly how they used techniques acquired from domestic gardening to plant on the land. Interestingly, I noticed that there was some hesitation about the planting of vegetables along the barrier. A few of the other guerrillas sniggered and smiled awkwardly as Sarah and Anna began the planting. My field diary highlighted that some playful taunts were thrown towards the two females from a guerrilla who had not attended the digs before. Nevertheless, all guerrillas appeared to admire the site following the 4 h spent 'tampering' with the space, a record thus far for time spent on-site.

Perhaps my most interesting observation during this dig occurred after the planting phase. I noticed how the guerrillas had run out of water and that the leader had instructed the only other male, Mark, to head into the nearby pub to request a top-up of the watering can. He reluctantly made his way to the pub, and on his return explained that the landlady was extremely enthusiastic about their efforts on the

**Fig. 4.8** Planting peas and spinach during phase three (Hardman's photograph)

space. Following the dig, we ventured into the pub, to say thank you and repay their favour by buying a few drinks and snacks: the few patrons present flocked around the group, asking questions and wondering why they voluntarily tackled the space.

### Phase Four: Continuing the Cultivation

This progress continues with phase four, which occurred 1 month after phase three, on the 27th March 2011. I immediately noted, on my arrival, how attendance drops significantly to a mere four guerrillas: Sarah, Mark, another female and Anna. At this point, due to my regular attendance, I had built up a reasonable rapport with the 'permanent' troop members, thus the greeting process was now rather relaxed, with members comfortable with my presence at the site. However, I noted, in my personal reflection on the dig, how this rapport requires management: as a researcher, one cannot become too close to the subjects in the investigation.

The dig began with troop members ensuring that the produce was still present. They surveyed the original sites and noted how the vegetables were coping. It appeared that, remarkably, the vegetables were flourishing in the relatively harsh climate and surroundings. The leader of F Troop felt that this was due to hidden nutrients contained within the soil. She elaborated and explained to me that, although the soil looked poor, deeper down beyond its membrane were richer layers, which allowed the water-intensive vegetables to grow so well. She also acknowledged that the constant watering of the produce, by her friends and colleagues, would have played a large factor in their survival.

**Fig. 4.9** Arranging the plot closest to the pub (Hardman's photograph)

Phase four, unlike the previous phases which concentrated on patches close to a busy intersection, was located further away from the road and towards the pub (see Fig. 4.4). This land was, originally, particularly hostile; the pub patrons would regularly throw disused cigarettes and other forms of rubbish into the shrubbery. Therefore, the first, and largest, part of this dig was spent clearing the debris from the site before planting could begin (Fig. 4.9).

The site featured in Fig. 4.9 was an area of high pedestrian activity. On this particular dig, however, due to the concerns about the edibility of the produce, the troop decided against planting more vegetables. The troop leader explained that the risks were too great with positioning produce in sight of the pub patrons, who may recognise the produce and attempt to eat it. On this occasion, the troop concentrated on improving the environment through the planting of bulbs and shrubbery. Their efforts were thus for aesthetic purposes and did not include any form of UA.

Nevertheless, I noted how they also focussed particularly on the vegetables in phase three and contemplated replicating this model on the phase four site but were held back by their worries with regard to the pub patrons eating the vegetables and the litter's effect on the site. Interestingly, as a compromise, the leader opted to plant more vegetables further along from the pub, between the phase three and four sites, forming a sort of connecting corridor of produce to link the sites which were rather isolated. There was a considerable amount of discussion on the idea of UA, particularly how other projects could be started in less affluent parts of the city, helping communities to supply themselves with fresh produce. Potential projects involved using schools as an avenue to gain more numbers: with children becoming vehicles for guerrilla gardening.

The phase also provided evidence to suggest that the rapport with the pub continued, with the troop leader venturing into the establishment to fill up the

water can again. On this occasion, I noted how several patrons, due to the proximity of the guerrillas to their pub, ventured outside to see what exactly was going on. They make mostly positive remarks about the state of the patch. In an attempt to speak with the patrons, Sarah playfully shouted at these individuals for making the site so shambolic, instructing the males to keep the space tidy in future.

### Phase Five: The Winter Dig

This particular dig was rather unusual as, unlike the previous digs which occurred during the warming months, phase five was scheduled in November, a late autumn/winter month. It became immediately apparent to me that only three guerrillas had appeared for the dig: Sarah; her male friend, Mark; and the 'second lieutenant', Anna. Sarah, the leader, stipulated that others had sent their apologies and were unable to make this particular date. This poor attendance appeared to anger Sarah, since most of the nonattendees had apparently wished for the original date to be moved in order to accommodate their needs and hectic lifestyles. In a similar manner to previous digs, she had advertised this event on Reynolds's forum (guerrillagardening.org) and received some responses, although in the event this communication medium attracted no new participants for the dig.

The dig's aim was also out of the ordinary when compared with the previous phases. Phase five was, like phase three, primarily designed to provide general maintenance (Fig. 4.7). This was a rather large undertaking, since three sites had been established in the area, each of which had taken several hours to cultivate and create. Evidently, the large task at hand resulted in a long amount of time at the site: almost 5 h in total, the longest time I have spent on a dig. Tasks included uprooting rotting vegetation and replacing crops with fresh plants. The priority lay with the aesthetics of the site, with F Troop appearing to divert from their crop-cultivating objectives. However, I noted how nasturtiums were still planted in this phase, although it appeared this was not a conscious decision by the group, rather the seeds and bulbs were leftovers from a previous venture.

The troop members appeared extremely relaxed and cared little for passing emergency vehicles or interested pedestrians. The only dialogue exchange between F Troop members and non-members were the occasional jokes exchanged with pub patrons who were smoking nearby. This discussion was rather short and predominantly involved F Troop members repeatedly instructing the customers to not litter the area. It was evident that each of the three members understood their position and duties, carrying on with jobs without consulting with Sarah. Their skills and confidence seemed to have developed during the successive digs. The troop moves from plot to plot, beginning at the far end with the space closest to the traffic light junction (phase one) and finishing with the area cultivated in phase four (Fig. 4.10). The only male member, the leader's friend Mark, preferred to take on less horticultural-centred tasks, such as cleaning spaces and moving equipment, whilst the females favoured the planting and general site organisation.

**Fig. 4.10** The winter dig and the maintenance of previous plots (Hardman's photograph)

The dig culminated with a social drink in the pub, again to thank the staff for their supplies. The landlady, serving behind the bar, was approached by the troop leader who asked whether the patches could be watered in their absence. The leader was surprised with her answer, since the landlady declared that she has already been watering the various plots. Interestingly, other staff members also claim to have maintained the spaces in the guerrillas' absence, tending to the vegetables and flowers throughout the week.

## *The Women's Group*

Whilst the above paints a detailed picture of F Troop's action, we now wish to focus on the opposite side of the guerrilla spectrum: bringing to light the WG's activities and their substantially different practices. Through a similar format, we provide a chronological account of their actions, which will be deconstructed further in the next chapter. Through adopting this approach, we hope to highlight our experiences on the ground with the guerrilla gardeners whilst simultaneously providing a review of their actions.

Figure 4.11 provides a spatial context for the size, and positioning, of the WG's site. The locale is evidently urban: housing surrounds the site on three flanks, whilst a large industrial complex is situated adjacent to the garden and across a rather busy road. The space now occupied by the community garden was once used by local children for play. Whilst there are other patches of open spaces around the area, it became apparent, during the informal discussions on-site, how parents preferred their children to use this particular patch due to its proximity to the large tower block where most of them lived.

**Fig. 4.11** The WG unpermitted community garden (Map data copyright of Google 2014, Bluesky)

The community garden is approximately 13 m in length and 5 m wide. In stark contrast to the environment of F Troop's digs, this space appeared relatively secure; a large black fence encircled the site preventing outsiders from entering and those using the garden from walking on to the busy road network. Nevertheless, due to the revelation of the unregulated nature of the community garden, I realised that this site did not conform to health and safety regulations; tools were occasionally strewn across the grass; and the beds were poorly arranged, creating obstacles as one wandered around the site. The site itself was also on a slight slope, which in wet conditions proved rather dangerous. Due to the nature of the WG's actions, I spent little time on the community garden itself and more in the adjacent community centre, where community lunches where held: these were often fortnightly, using produce from the informal community garden. This enabled me to witness how the produce was used, who attended these lunches and generally assess the impact of this site on the local community.

The following section adopts a slightly different approach to that of F Troop's narrative in exploring the various interactions with the WG and community. The number of lunches attended would result in this section dominating the book. Due to the frequency of the WG action, I attended substantially more lunches than F Troop digs; thus, a similar approach to that of the exploration of F Troop would be inappropriate. Instead of a chronological description of UA-related revelations, in this instance, I have opted to reflect on the seasonal cycle: grouping the field notes and exploring the WG's activities in the various seasons. This provides details of a full cycle of events, including how the WG operated during the harsher months and whether the UA suffered. Owing to the timing of the research, the

cycle begins in the autumn. These were the earliest recorded interactions with the WG, and thus, due to time constraints, the only option was to start recording from this point in time.

### Autumn 2010

I scoped the site for a few weeks before pursuing the data collection. This was mainly to ensure that I had sufficient access to the various attendees and the site itself. I regularly attended the lunches in order to build a rapport with the women, realising that, as a male, it would perhaps be difficult. Access was duly granted and I was able to collect field notes towards the beginning of September 2010.

The community garden at this point was rather bland; poorly cut-out plots existed with a few raised beds surrounding the perimeter of the space (Fig. 4.12). I was told that the WG had received training from an outside body, arranged and funded through a local charity. Yet it was still rather surprising to see the garden in this state, as one

**Fig. 4.12** The community garden in September 2010, the early stages of development (Hardman's photograph)

would presume that, at this time, the WG would be well into preparations for the next growing season, using the space effectively during these more productive months. Nevertheless, September's lunches featured some produce from the garden; Box 4.4 contains my reflections on the last lunch of this month:

**Box 4.4: An Extra from My Field Diary**

- Residents have a choice with the main course; a curry, shepherd's pie or lasagne. 'Mon' explains that wherever possible the ingredients are sourced locally. The tomatoes in the lasagne are from the garden as were the potatoes that made the shepherd's pie.
- Attendees are herded to a bowl of salad adjacent to the main service counter. The bowl is filled with other vegetables from the growing site.
- Rhubarb and custard is the dessert; the rhubarb is sourced from the community garden.

I regularly noted how vegetables, such as tomatoes, lettuce and rhubarb were used during lunches. There appeared to be a repetitive use of these vegetables; nothing new was introduced and only a small portion of what was growing in the garden was used in the lunch. However, productivity soon plunged, with subsequent community lunches – during the autumn months – unsurprisingly featuring less locally sourced food. This was especially evident in the November notes I took, which featured no food sourced from the community garden. I noted how Mon and the WG tended to buy in food from large popular supermarkets, using donations from those who attend the lunches. There was little to no planning for the next growing season, with discussions focussing more on local politics as opposed to the community garden's future.

Perhaps one of the other surprising observations, which arose during practically every field investigation, surrounded the access to the community garden. I noted that nobody seemed to interact with the space itself; the two access points were cut off and regularly locked. The windows which overlooked the garden steamed up, due to condensation from the cooking and sheer number of attendees; this further isolated the community garden from the attendees' gaze. I felt that this space was disconnected from those who attended the lunch, with only select WG members allowed to use the area at permitted times.

### Winter 2010 – Early 2011

The winter months were, unsurprisingly, rather unproductive. Britain endured a hard winter with large amounts of snowfall, which prevented some lunches from going ahead. The WG relied heavily on supermarket items to keep the community lunch functioning when the weather permitted. No produce was used from the garden throughout any of the lunches in this season. Interestingly, my notes revealed that

**Fig. 4.13** The beds in 2011, now surrounded by a concrete border (Hardman's photograph)

some vegetation remained in the beds, which had by now been lined with a rather bleak-looking concrete border, making them stand out more from the surrounding grassy areas (Fig. 4.13). At this point, I was interested in what happened with this vegetation: who accessed it and how it was used.

I also noticed how the WG had erected several new raised beds surrounding the main plots. It was startling to see that site expansion had taken place in perhaps the most unproductive of seasons, with the women attempting to grow produce in these structures (pictured in Fig. 4.13). In a similar manner to my autumn observations, I noted how the site was constantly locked; no resident, apart from the WG members, interacted with the space or acknowledged its existence. During the only December lunch, which was specifically designed for local pensioners, I asked whether anyone was allowed out on the site, 'no way, too dodgy, they'd fall and hurt themselves' replied a group member: it appears that the WG members were fearful that someone will trip and injure themselves whilst out in the garden; thus, access has been restricted, partially for this reason.

### Spring 2011

The WG had planned for the new planting season by installing what appeared to be protective barriers for the large main plots (Fig. 4.14). These were funded by a local health organisation, which the women had persuaded to support the garden's development and maintenance. To the untrained eye, and at first glance, one could mistake the plots for raised beds; but the vegetables were still grown in the soil and were not elevated from the ground. The beds, throughout this season, appeared rather empty; the WG members stated that planting is sporadic and conducted 'whenever we have the chance during the week'.

**Fig. 4.14** The barrier installation on the community garden (Hardman's photograph)

I note how this addition of a more sophisticated infrastructure was yet another sign of expansion, with WG members – especially Mon – stating that they have even more ambitious plans for the future. These plans include acquiring fruit trees, to create a small community orchard, and purchasing a greenhouse for the site. Interestingly, there was no mention of this expansion, or alteration to the site, during the subsequent spring community lunches. The site was still ignored by the community attending and was inaccessible due to the locked doors. In a similar manner to the winter lunches, no produce was featured in the lunches. This was apparent until the 28th of April, when a small salad bowl appeared.

### Summer 2011

This was perhaps where the largest alteration of the site occurred; large amounts of produce could be seen growing in the space, due to a combination of ideal weather conditions and time spent on the site by WG members. Figure 4.15 displays a colourful site, which featured large amounts of vegetables rising from beneath the barriers which surround the plots: lettuce, tomatoes, courgettes and a variety of herbs were grown in large numbers. It becomes apparent, during the lunch discussions in the kitchen, that WG members spent large amounts of time on the site, enjoying the sunshine and cultivating the space. All but one of the WG members was unemployed, and thus, they have ample time to put into the community garden.

Despite the obvious impressive display featured in Fig. 4.15, my summer field notes demonstrated the lack of attention given to the space from community members at the lunch. The weather was frequently beautiful with clear skies and high temperatures; whilst windows were opened to let in fresh air, the door providing

**Fig. 4.15** The community garden flourishing during the summer months (Hardman's photograph)

access to the community garden remained locked. Attendees did not pay any attention to the scenery and seemed to focus predominantly on their lunches and discussion groups. Nevertheless, the ever-enthusiastic WG members attempted to engage with attendees and educate them about the benefits of eating healthily, using the lunch as a tool to get their message across.

### Late 2011 – Early 2012

As the months progressed, I began to tone down my interactions with the site, instead conducting interviews and, as part of an 'exit strategy', making sure that the WG members understood that I would have to retire to write up my findings. Before departing, my field notes demonstrated, during the autumn months, a continual worry from the WG regarding the continued existence of the community centre, the building to which the community garden is attached. Whilst produce in the garden was flourishing (for instance, see Fig. 4.16), the economic climate could see the adjacent community centre shut down. Obviously, this is a huge worry for the women who rallied to prevent such a measure from the local authority: protesting to local councillors and other key actors.

Perhaps one of the most notable additions to the site was a series of fruit trees (Fig. 4.17): some of which had been planted in the autumn, bought new from garden centres and placed around the edges of the fencing. Surprisingly, I was only notified about these during my winter observation; for some reason I had earlier missed the obvious inclusion of the trees in the space. Extra trees were added through liaising with a contact in the city who was supportive of their cause.

**Fig. 4.16** A marrow in the community garden (Hardman's photograph)

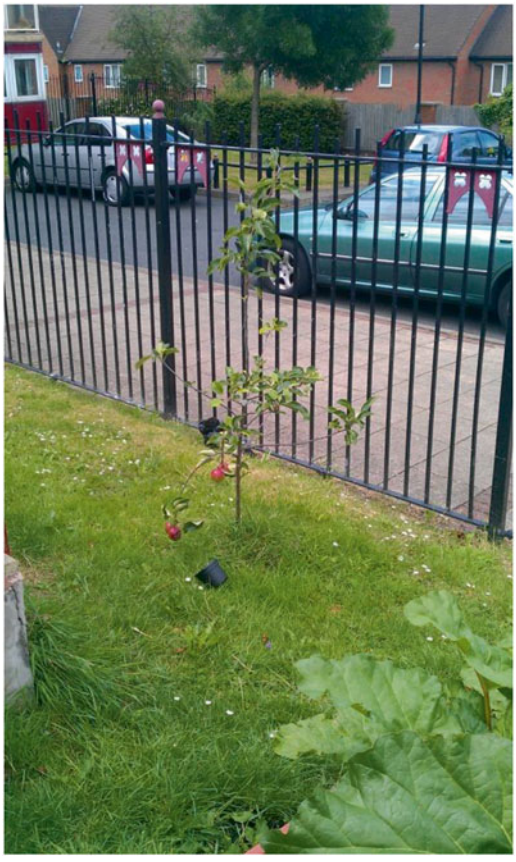

**Fig. 4.17** An unsupported fruit tree on the community garden, close to the pavement (Hardman's photograph)

The positioning of the trees, according to Mon, allowed those who passed the site to freely pick the fruit, whilst the women could enjoy the apples which fell within the community garden's perimeter. The ambition of the WG was to create an orchard on the site, once the weather improved in the following year. They were to purchase trees using funding acquired from a local health centre.

## The Stories of F Troop and the WG: Key Messages

Through the section above, we have highlighted the story of the two groups with which we had the most interaction. Whilst there is little reflection on the solo guerrilla gardener, due to a lack of access, the narratives provide a unique insight into two significantly different forms of guerrilla gardeners who pursue a UA agenda. Ultimately, we aim to reveal how these groups go about their action, the actors involved and how it progresses over time.

The purpose of this chapter was to enable the reader to experiences the two settings in which the researcher was embedded. Too often guerrilla gardening is viewed as a secretive activity, with little exploration of the practices on the ground. The field notes reflected on in this chapter and more detail on the various stages can be found through Hardman's (2013) PhD thesis; this document contains the raw field note and interview data on which we will reflect further on in the following chapter. This following chapter takes this exploration forward and provides a more abstract reflection on the guerrilla gardeners. In particular, we focus on *why* these actors have opted for an unpermitted route and then relate this to wider debates in the area. We then proceed to challenge some of the actions by these guerrilla gardeners and reflect on how the activity is portrayed in academic and media circles.

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