

# **Guerrilla Gardening in Manchester**

## **Exploring Perceptions of Guerrilla Practices**

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## **Abstract**

Urban Agriculture (UA) is a new field in the academic world and, since recently, has received a lot of interest. Yet the idea of illegal or ‘informal’ urban gardening is neglected. Guerrilla gardening is "the illicit cultivation of someone else's land" (Reynolds 2009, 12) and has a long tradition across the globe. It is not restricted to food production but also includes the beautification of space with flowers and other plants. In Greater Manchester, several forms of UA exist with guerrilla gardening being one of them. Although local people and organisations might not know the term guerrilla gardening, they practice it – consciously or not. The following report gives a view on the (il)legal urban agriculture scene in Greater Manchester. Therefore several organisations as well as local people have been interviewed and their views and opinions have been compared to discover differences as well as similarities.

# Introduction

According to a prognosis by Statista (2014), 70% of the world's population will be living in cities by 2050. Even now, half of the people living on planet earth reside permanently in urban areas (Statists 2014). As long as cities have existed, they have been accompanied by Urban Agriculture (UA). But recently UA seems to become an upward trend. Beautifying a concrete environment with colourful plants is 'in' and also cultivation your own fruit and vegetables in an urban environment is very popular. People have become aware of the advantages of local produce and its benefits to the environment and for many, growing and consuming their own food is also a relieve for the moneybag. (Hamilton 2014)

Also in the academic world, UA there is a nascent literature base on guerrilla gardening. There are numerous publications centring on urban gardening and urban growing: for example, if one merely types 'urban agriculture' into Google Scholar, there are over 2.3m hits (Google Scholar, n.d.). Despite this interest, what has been neglected so far are informal forms, especially guerrilla gardening. Guerrilla gardeners grow without permission on land they do not own. The following part of this short report provides a general overview on guerrilla gardening and its characteristics.

## Guerrilla Gardening

Richard Reynolds, founder of [www.guerrillagardening.org](http://www.guerrillagardening.org) – a platform for guerrilla gardeners to connect – is probably the most famous guerrilla gardener in the world. He defines the practice as the illicit cultivation of someone else's land (Reynolds 2009, 12); according to him, every act of gardening in a location where it is not allowed is guerrilla gardening. It does not matter if the gardeners are aware of their illegal activities or not. This definition is also taken up by most of the few academic pieces of literature (see Crane 2011, Crane, Viswanathan & Whitelaw 2014, Hardman 2011, Hardman & Larkham 2014, ...).

The term goes back to a group of gardeners in New York in 1973. Liz Christy, a young artist, one day discovered tomatoes growing wildly on a heap of rubbish. She and a group of friends started to spread seeds across vacant spots and planted trees.

Soon the group approached a bigger project – a community garden. They found a suitable spot and started planting. Everything happened without permission. The group around Liz Christy called themselves Green Guerillas as their tactics resembled those of Guerrilla fighters who operate at a grassroots level against power holders. (Reynolds 2012<sup>3</sup>) The Green Guerillas and their garden still exist. They got legal permission for the garden and are a non-profit organisation, which supports about 200 community gardens in New York (Green Guerillas, n.d.).

## **Methodology**

The aim of this STSM was to get a view on the urban gardening and especially guerilla gardening scene in Greater Manchester. Therefore a qualitative approach has been adopted. The research was divided into four phases:

- Theoretical preparation
  - gathering bibliographical information to find out about the current research state of guerrilla gardening
  - definition of research method, research area and target groups
  - preparation of guiding questions
- Selection of sites and organisations to visit
  - with the help of Dr Hardman I selected suitable sites for a visit and arranged meetings with organisations for interviews
- Fieldwork
  - visit of sites planned and taking pictures
  - interviews with people from the identified target groups (see Target Groups)
- Evaluation of gathered data
  - evaluation of interviews
  - results and conclusion

## Research Area

The research area is Greater Manchester. Located in the North West of England it consists of ten districts with a population of 2.7 million. After Greater London and the West Midlands it is the third most populated area in the UK. (Wikipedia n.d.) According to a survey conducted by the BBC Inside Out in 2007, where 1,000 people were questioned, Manchester is the second most important city in the UK (BBC 2007). With an unemployment rate of 8.7% the area lies above the national average of 7.2% (Nomis 2014).



Figure 1: Greater Manchester

(source: <http://www.swede-dreamz.co.uk/uploads/images/Directory/Greater%20Manchester.gif>)

All the visited sites except one are within this area. Todmorden is the only one outside the research area but as Incredible Edible Todmorden is a primary example for guerilla gardening it should not be left out as it is only located a few kilometres north of Rochdale.

## **Research Method**

To find out about the views on guerrilla gardening of local people from various perspectives, informal interviews were chosen as a method. To get comparable data, some guiding questions were prepared which every interviewee was asked (see appendix). For the interviews with local food organisations and urban planners, appointments were arranged. For the other two target groups (local people, guerrilla gardeners) there was no possibility to arrange meetings in advance. People were approached on the street and at the "Dig the City" urban gardening festival.

## **Target Groups**

To get a proper view on the scene it is necessary to encounter as many points of view as possible. Therefore four target groups were identified:

### 1. Local Food Organisations

There are local food organisations around Greater Manchester, which try to encourage urban gardening and operate in a legal way. They should be able to give a view on the legal urban gardening scene as well as maybe provide some experience with guerrilla gardening/guerrilla gardeners. I was able to meet with people from Growing Manchester, a program established by the city council, Growing in the, a local food organisation initiated by local people and Real Food Wythenshawe.

### 2. Local People

Local people are an important factor in urban green space and agricultural development because it should fulfil their wants and needs. Getting the view of ordinary people living in Greater Manchester can give a clue about if the council provides enough growing facilities or not and potential goal conflicts. Six local people were interviewed on the streets around Manchester.

### 3. Urban Planners

As urban planners are very much involved in land use decisions and green space development in a city, their view is of particular interest when it comes what to do with unused space in a city. I was able to talk to member of Salford City Council and a landscape architect who are both involved in the Pendelton Regeneration Project.

#### 4. Guerrilla Gardeners

Actual guerrilla gardeners in Greater Manchester were not easy to find. But their views were the most interesting ones as they actually practice illegal gardening. Incredible Edible Todmorden (IET) is a prime example of guerrilla gardening and is located close to Greater Manchester. Incredible Edible Salford was inspired by IET and they maintain legal and illegal grow sites in Salford.

## Findings

In total, nine sites/organisations were visited. As already indicated before, only one was outside Greater Manchester. The remaining eight are either part of Salford or Manchester.

-  Real Food Wythenshawe
-  Incredible Edible Salford
-  "Dig the City" Festival
-  Growing Manchester
-  Growing in the City
-  Incredible Edible Todmorden
-  Pendelton Regeneration Project
-  University of Salford
-  Leaf Street Community Garden

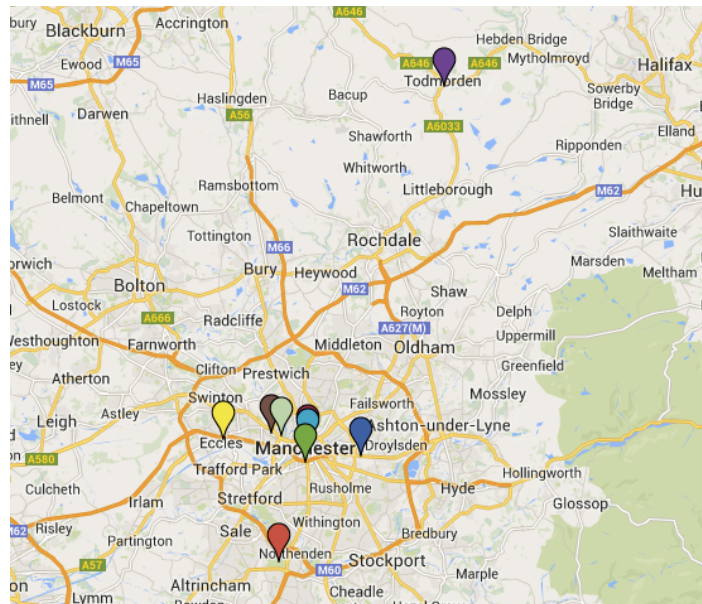


Figure 2: all 9 sites visited (source: author's map)

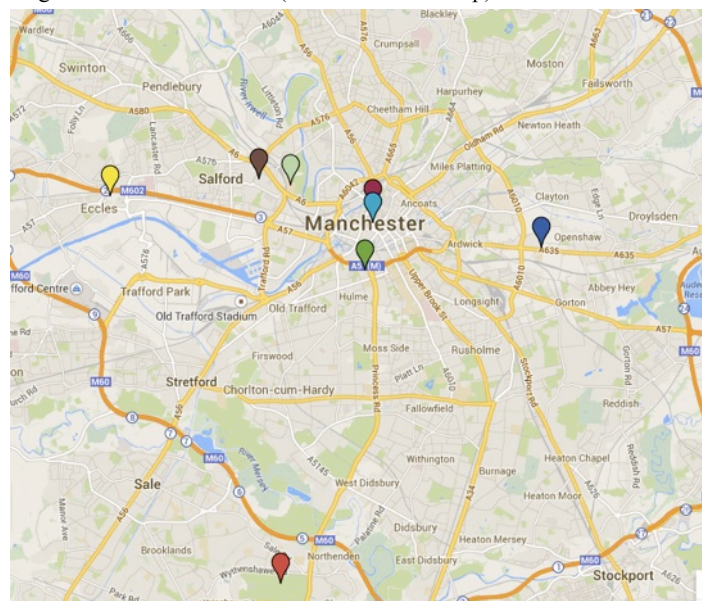


Figure 3: 8 sites in Greater Manchester (source: author's map)



## **Local Food Organisations**

### **Growing Manchester**

I talked to people of several projects. Food Futures, a council operated organisation in the city of Manchester, hosts the Growing Manchester project which supports local people in setting up and maintaining a community garden by finding suitable grow sites, offering training and providing tools. As the local people come to Growing Manchester to start a legal community garden, the project does not really get in contact with illegal forms of urban gardening. It is their aim to help people grow their own food in a legal way and to make community gardens sustainable.

### **Growing in the City**

Growing in the City is a non-funded community project. They operate a community garden and interact with local organisations like a mental health charity and a local college. Both use their garden for treatments and education. Now Growing in the City is part of Growing Manchester and operates on a legal basis but initially they started growing food on church grounds without the council's permission because it would have taken too long and they did not know who to contact for permission. For the "Dig the City" urban gardening festival they created an edible bus stop. They would like to convert bus stops into edible places as many people are spending time every day waiting for the bus in places that do not look very nice. An edible bus stop would offer them an opportunity to pick fresh, locally grown food while waiting for the bus.



Figure 4: edible bus stop at "Dig the City" front and back (source: author's photograph)

## **Real Food Wythenshawe**

Real Food Wythenshawe is another food organisation in Manchester. They operate in Wythenshawe, a part of the city of Manchester. The project consists of several key partners from public, private and voluntary organisations and offers skills and experience. They try to inform and educate as many locals as possible about how to live a healthier life. In Wythenshawe Park they operate an urban farm with some animals and a walled garden for vegetable produce. The produce is sold in a small store directly at the farm.



Figure 5: Real Food Wythenshawe urban farm, location see Figure 2/3 (source: author's photographs)

## **Local People**

Six local people from various parts of Manchester and various social backgrounds and age groups were interviewed. In general the local people seem to be satisfied with the amount of green space available but most of the time the green spaces are not well maintained and litter is a big problem. Despite the litter problem many people use urban green space, mostly parks, on a daily basis. There is a prevailing view, that the

city council does not involve local people enough into the green space development and most of the people (5 people) want to receive more information about the council's plans. People who were not growing their own food (4 people) in general were not well informed about possibilities to grow without a private garden except for allotments. People growing their own food (2 people) tend to be well informed about alternative options but in general they all thought that the government could do more especially when it comes to informing people about their possibilities. There was also a noticeable discontent with bureaucracy. The people did not know whom to contact when they wanted to start growing without a private garden.

When it comes to Guerrilla Gardening, the views are mixed. No one interviewed knew the term Guerrilla Gardening. After an explanation, there were mixed responses. People without a private garden or community garden space tended to be more in favour of illegal gardening than those who were already growing in legal ways. But all agreed that as long as no one is disturbed and the gardening activity is kept within reasonable limits, they do not have any problems with Guerrilla Gardening. Problems would arise as soon as the guerrilla gardeners start building on the growing site or when the grow site takes space which is needed in another way for example as children's playing grounds.

## **Urban Planners**

Unfortunately there was no opportunity to speak to urban planners who were uninvolved in urban gardening but a member of Salford City Council and a landscape architect who were involved in the Pendelton regeneration program could be interviewed. Pendelton is a degenerate area in Salford, a neighbouring city of Manchester. Over the next 10-15 years the area will be regenerated and guerrilla gardening will be part of the process. The Pendelton area is not well maintained, there is no real community and the green space is unused and neglected. It became overgrown and filled with litter over time. As the local people should be integrated in the regeneration process and the budget is low guerrilla gardening seems to be a suitable way. A movement should be built up within the area so that the people come together and take responsibility for wasteland and make it their garden. As a first step, potential guerrilla gardening space was identified and indicated on a map.



Figure 6: potential guerrilla gardening areas along Pendelton Broadwalk (source: Pendelton Regeneration Project)

Officially one would have to apply and get permission to grow on vacant spots in the city but the local authority in Salford tends not to interfere with illegal grow sites. It is an unwritten acceptance that one can garden wherever one wants to as there is so much space available and no one really takes care of it. Also it saves time and money for the city council if they do not have to maintain the spaces. At a short visit on the site, a small guerrilla garden in the area was discovered. The potential seems to be high as there is already someone gardening on an illegal basis.



Figure 7: small guerrilla garden on the potential Guerrilla Gardening site of the Pendelton Regeneration Project (source: Pendelton Regeneration Project and author's photograph)

## Guerrilla Gardeners

### Incredible Edible Todmorden

As one of the most famous Guerrilla Gardening projects in the world – Incredible Edible Tormorden – is not far away, I took the chance and visited it. IET was started in 2008 and still the gardeners mostly operate on an illegal basis. In Todmorden edible plants grow everywhere around the city and everyone is allowed to take the food and use it. Most of the sites do not have a permission to be where they are and the people growing are well aware of this fact. They never really thought about needing any permission as in their eyes they are doing something good and so far they have not encountered problems with the local authority or residents. The illegal factor also makes their work a bit more fun and it gives them a certain thrill. In their opinion, allowing gardening on vacant land and public space for everyone would help to build more sustainable communities, reduce the carbon footprint and support local food production. Estelle Brown of the IET crew also offers tours around for people who are

interested in their project. In corporation with the local health centre they created a "health route" through Todmorden which leads past most of their grow sites.



Figure 8: Estelle Brown giving a tour around the grow sites (source: author's photograph)



Figure 9: place regenerated by guerrilla gardening which used to be filled with litter (source: author's photograph)



Figure 10: Sergeant Michael Bowden checking the carrots (source: Estelle Brown)



Figure 11: unknown family picking blackcurrants (source: Estelle Brown)

### **Incredible Edible Salford**

IET became a role model for hundreds of cities and their approach has been adopted a lot. There is also an Incredible Edible in Salford which was inspired by IET and started in February 2013. They consider themselves as a social movement to bring community, education and business together to grow their own food and so create cohesion (Incredible Edible Salford, no year). The founders did not want to wait for the council's permission so they just started planting. Now some sites are still illegal whereas others, especially very public ones, have permission to avoid conflict with the council or neighbours. For the people of IES it makes no difference if the site is legal or not but having the support of the council or neighbours can be beneficial to promoting the site.

### **Guerrilla Gardener at Salford University Campus**

The University of Salford itself is the playground of a guerrilla gardener. He operates on the campus and plants wild flowers. Unfortunately I did not get the opportunity to meet him but he made contact with Dr Hardman and revealed himself as the creator of the wildflower beds. The beds fit very well into the campus landscape and no one has noticed before that these do not have any permission to be there.



Figure12: wild flower guerrilla beds on University of Salford campus (source: author's photograph)

### **Leaf Street Community Garden**

There is also another famous guerrilla garden in Manchester – the Leaf Street Community Garden, which is located at Leaf Street in Hulme (see map page 6). I tried to establish contact with the gardeners there but unfortunately I would not get any response to my e-mails so I decided to go there and have a look at the garden. I was hoping to meet some people there but the garden was deserted. In general the garden seems quite overgrown and not well maintained. There are fruit trees and berry bushes between high grasses but there were some beds, which seemed to be cultivated. The front part of the garden is very overgrown but the further one goes in the more one can see that people are growing in this area.



Figure 13: overgrown Leaf Street Community Garden (source: author's photograph)





Figure 14: planted beds at Leaf Street Community Garden (source: author's photograph)

## **Discussion**

As the findings show, in Greater Manchester there are many urban gardening facilities. Although there seem to be enough opportunities for people without a private garden to grow food, most people do not use the facilities due to a lack of information. Local people would like to know more about growing facilities and require more information from the city council. They also struggle to find a contact person for their concerns as they feel, that the city council organisation is confusing.

In Greater Manchester Guerrilla Gardening seems to be widely accepted. The locals as well as the city council do not mind an illegal gardening activity as long as no one is disturbed by it and everything stays within certain limits. As soon as the illegal gardeners start to build on the territory they occupy or use space, which is used or needed for another purpose, the locals perceive the gardening activities as disturbing. But the example of the Pendelton regeneration project in Salford shows, that a council is even not reluctant to incorporate Guerrilla Gardening into their set of tools for revitalising neglected green space. This is a very interesting approach as it highly involves the local people and simplifies as well as speeds up the whole regeneration process.

## **Conclusion**

In Greater Manchester, Guerrilla Gardening occurs quite often but the city council is very tolerant about it. Although there are opportunities to grow food without a private garden, many people still go for the illegal option. Three main reasons for illegal gardening can be identified. First, the people wanted the space to be more beautiful and were not satisfied with the maintenance work of the city council. Second, they found it way to complicated to contact the local authority to ask for permission and just did rather than to ask. And third, people just did not know that planting and growing on a site without permission is illegal. But in general, as long a no one is disturbed, neither of the parties I talked to sees a problem in growing plants, edible or not, where space is available.

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# Appendix

## Guiding Questions

### Locals People

- What do you think about the green spaces and their management in your town? Are you satisfied with it or would you like to change something?
- How and how often do you use urban green spaces and which kind of green spaces do you use?
- Do you garden or produce your own fruit and/or vegetables?  
If no:
  - Would you like to?
  - Do you know any opportunities to do so if you don't have an own garden space?If yes:

Where do you garden?

  - If not in a private, allotment or community garden: Do you have permission to garden there? Do you do informal/illegal /guerrilla gardening?
- Do you think there are enough gardening opportunities for people without a private garden?
- Would you like to take part in the urban green space development/design of your town?
- Would you like to appropriate open public space?
- What do you think about people appropriating public space by gardening?
- If gardening in public space (like tree pits, public parks, urban brownfields) was allowed for everyone, what do you think would change in your town?
- Do you personally consider it a good idea to allow gardening in public space for everyone?
- If gardening in public space was allowed, would you do it?
- What kind of plants would you like to cultivate?
- Have you ever heard about Guerrilla Gardening?

### Estelle Brown – Incredible Edible Todmorden

- How was Incredible Edible Todmorden started?
- Were the initiators aware of their illegal activities?
- Have they been Guerrilla gardening before?
- Why was IET started as a Guerrilla Gardening project?
- How big was the project when it was legalised?
- Why did the project receive legal status and who was responsible for it?
- What has changed since the project received legal status?
- Did the legalisation only bring positive effects or were there also negative ones?
- In how far do you and the municipal gardening office work together?
- If gardening on public space (like tree pits and public parks) was allowed for everyone, what do you think would change?
- What would a complete legalisation of Guerrilla Gardening activities change for you? Would this affect your interest in it?
- Do you personally consider it a good idea to allow gardening in public space for everyone?

### Local Food Organisations

- What does your organisation do?
- What is the legal situation for urban gardening in your town? Who is allowed to plant what and where?
- Does the city administration encourage urban gardening? If yes, how?
- Do you think the municipality offers enough opportunities for people without a private garden to plant flowers, fruit or vegetables?
- In how far do you and the municipal gardening office work together?
- What do you think about Guerrilla Gardening?
- Do you work together with Guerrilla Gardeners?
- Does Guerrilla Gardening interfere with your work?
- If gardening on public space (like tree pits and public parks) was allowed for everyone, what do you think would change?
- Do you personally consider it a good idea to allow gardening in public space for everyone?

### City Planner

- What is the legal situation for urban gardening in your town? Who is allowed to plant what and where?
- Does the city administration encourage urban gardening? If yes, how?
- Do you plant flowers and plants for visual improvement or do you also use edible plants?
- Do you think the municipality offers enough opportunities for people without a private garden to plant flowers, fruit or vegetables?
- Do you know what guerrilla gardening is?
- What do you think about Guerrilla Gardening??
- Does Guerrilla Gardening interfere with your work?
- Should gardening in public space be allowed to anyone?
- If gardening on public space (like tree pits and public parks) was allowed for everyone, what do you think would change?
- Would there be problems? If yes, which?
- Do you personally consider it a good idea to allow gardening in public space for everyone?