



Guerrilla Gardening in Greater Boston

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I confess. I am a Guerrilla Gardener, and I'll tell you how it all started.

I began "regular" gardening years ago in my small Boston backyard. An herb garden expanded into a vegetable garden. Eventually the grass disappeared, replaced by an eclectic mix of perennials and annuals. My plot of earth was so small, and my enthusiasm so vast, that I began to

eye every unused, weed-infested patch of land in my neighborhood as a possible site for gardening.

For example, on my way to the T stop every work day, I passed an ugly parking lot, surrounded by a broken-down metal fence. Between the lot and the street, there was a strip of ground about three feet wide and maybe 20 feet long. Like many urban plots, it was filled with a tangle of litter and weeds—and not the pretty kind. But I imagined something different going on there. I imagined transformation through illicit cultivation.

So, one weekend day, without asking anyone's permission, I began cleaning up that strip of land with intent to plant. That's the day I became a (proud) guerrilla gardener, aided and abetted by my minor child. I like to think I was modeling civic responsibility and Thoreau-like independence, with a touch of anarchy. (The good kind.) My daughter and I hauled pails of compost from our own backyard bin, amended the poor dirt, and planted some seeds. I chose decorative plants that I knew would grow in crummy soil and could withstand occasional neglect. Sunflowers. Black-eyed Susans. Morning Glories. (We couldn't do edibles because of lead contamination.) We kept the wild milk weed plants we found there to feed the Monarch butterflies and host their eggs.

Each evening after work, we carried pails of water to the site and carefully tended the seeds. The flowers grew. The morning glories fought the weeds for fence space and wrapped themselves around the ridiculously tall sunflowers. After a while, sweet, unexpected things began to happen.

Passers-by began to stop and chat with us, sharing their stories and thanking us for the flowers. Strangers gave us plants thinned out of their own gardens. The six-year-old twins in the house abutting the lot came out to help us weed and water. Yellow finches rested on the tall sunflowers, giving neighbors a lovely view as they did their supper dishes.

The parking lot owner—the landlord for a nearby triple-decker—got wind of our efforts and came around one day to chat. He and his wife were delighted, not only because it perked up his lot, but because it reminded him of gardening in his home country, China. I listened, leaning on my shovel, imagining tea fields and bamboo shoots.

After I moved out of the neighborhood, the twins' mother became the garden's steward, and a good friend, too. And I went on to scatter seeds in other places in need of color and fragrance.

I've always thought it would be a blast to turn an ESOL class into a band of guerrilla gardeners. Imagine the rich possibilities for language learning and community building while spreading seeds—and joy.

I have only recently discovered the book *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman, which has become popular in many ESOL classes. And I've always loved the children's book *Miss Rumphius*—well worth a read, even if you are all grown up.