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**AOW Week of 9/12:** ‘Guerrilla gardeners’ spread seeds of social change, **Emily Wax April 14, 2012**

“Let’s throw some bombs,” a young woman calls out, waterproof floral purse swinging on her shoulder and pigtail braids flying behind her as a band of 25 followers cheer, “Cool!”

They rush toward a drab, vacant lot in Shaw. Some climb up onto the back of a truck to get better aim at their target. But these bombers aren’t likely to appear on any terrorist list or even get arrested. They’re throwing “seed bombs,” golf­ball­size lumps of mud packed with wildflower seeds, clay and a little bit of compost and water, which they just learned to make at a free seed-bombing workshop for Washington’s **guerrilla** **gardeners**.

The **benign** bombing is part of a larger phenomenon known as activist gardening that is taking off this spring in cities such as Portland, Detroit, Baltimore and the District, where young **urbanites** are redefining the seemingly fusty pastime as a tool for social change. This is civil disobedience with a twist: Vegetable patches and sunflower gardens planted on decrepit medians and in derelict lots in an effort to beautify inner ­city eyesores or grow healthful food in neighborhoods with limited access to fresh food.

“Guerrilla gardening is urban gardening and food justice. It’s just this really cool mix,” says Emmy Gran, 25, who is teaching seed­ bombing in a floppy sun hat at a recent Saturday morning workshop in the courtyard of Old City Green, a gardening store in Shaw. “But it’s controversial, too. If you see an abandoned, neglected lot and you decide to do something about it by planting vegetables and herbs, are you an occupier? It’s kind of radical, in some ways.” And every radical movement needs graffiti. Gran hauls out her Cuisinart to make the green “spray­paint” required for gardening activism’s biodegradable moss graffiti. Ingredients: moss, a half teaspoon of sugar and yogurt which, when blended, will stick to walls. (“You can also use buttermilk,” she adds.)

With a light rain starting to fall, the group walks over to a curb near the garden store and uses the **gloppy** mixture to write “Nourish, Grow, Shaw” in big, moss­green letters. Activist gardening is the latest face of social justice in the District. Think pulling on muddy work boots and hauling fertilizer and mulch to a sad-looking lot, then persuading your housemates to get off their iPads and go outdoors to plant snap peas and garlic.

The group at the workshop includes former Peace Corps volunteers, environmental activists, and social justice workers, all eager to learn more about subversive or sneaky gardening, as it is also known.

“It’s all a lot less devious than it seems,” says Ellen Abramowitz, 22, who works for the Alliance to Save Energy, a nonprofit group that educates schools about energy efficiency. “Besides, who doesn’t love flowers?”

Gran tells her students — most of whom were born in the 1980s — that guerrilla gardening dates from the late ­1960s, when a **disused** patch of land near the University of California campus was co­-opted by the community and reimagined as a public green. Today, she says, it takes place in more than 30 countries, with much of the activity documented on the British-­based Web site guerrillagardening.org.

It has spread in the United States in recent years, spurred by the “green” movement and the increased demand for locally grown, healthful food. “We’re making the city what we want, ” Gran says. They’re doing it one flower at a time. The bombs will — in theory — bloom into tulips, poppies and baby’s breath, forgetme­nots and **marigolds** when the fist-sized bombs hit, then expand.

It also helps if there’s a healthy spring rain, said Scott Aker, head of horticulture for the U.S. National Arboretum. If the bombs are launched into a sunny space where there’s not too much other **vegetation** present, then he gives the seeds a 70 percent chance of blooming. “But either way, it sounds like great fun,” Aker says. “On your commute, you can toss one out the window.”

Some of the young people attending the class — run by Knowledge Commons D.C., an organization that provides free public workshops on a variety of subjects — have secured permits for their plots. This spring Sarah McLaughlin, 25, and her boyfriend Josh Singer, 31, started a community “parken” on a 2.7­acre parcel of unused land north of Howard University. They named it Wangari Gardens after Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Prize­winning Kenyan environmental activist.

“We saw the land near where we have a group house, and we wanted to use green space to build community,” says Singer, who’s “We saw the land near where we have a group house, and we wanted to use green space to build community,” says Singer, who’s wearing an “I Dig Trees” T­shirt under his Carhartt jacket. So far, McLaughlin and Singer have helped the community plant 59 garden plots in Wangari Gardens, each tended by neighbors who live nearby and pay annual dues to grow food and flowers in a raised garden bed with advice from experienced gardeners.

On a recent visit to Wangari, several longtime residents said they were happy with the garden because the land had been vacant for so long. Singer has put $3,000 in soil and other supplies on his credit card. But he hopes the garden will flourish and that he will eventually **obtain** sufficient funding and grants to add a dog park, a butterfly/native plant garden and an outdoor classroom.

“There’s just so many really cool gardening projects going on around Washington,” Singer says. “It’s a great movement.”

Dennis Chestnut, 63, whom many see as the father of the District’s activist gardening scene is founder and executive director of Groundwork Anacostia River D.C., a nonprofit group that seeks to reclaim vacant and neglected land for conservation, recreation and economic development.

He helped start two community vegetable gardens in wards 7 and 8, “in places where convenience stores typically sell alcohol and chips,” he said. Chestnut says he’s proud that the young people in Washington are suddenly so interested in gardening.

“Go to sleep one night and wake up, and there’s corn growing in the derelict lot by your check ­cashing store,” he laughs. “I’m all for all of it: guerrilla gardening, community gardens. These young people living in D.C. are just go­-getters. But I’m also a child of the ’60s. I understand it’s really important to organize all of us so we can work on common issues.” There’s so much new community gardening going on in the District, he says, that it’s tough to keep track.

Although activist gardening is largely an **urban** phenomenon, there are self-­described “suburban guerrilla gardeners” in Arlington County and Alexandria, Wheaton and Gaithersburg who have organized meet­ups online. They describe stealthily turning empty spaces that are near strip malls, highways and parking lots into **verdant** flower and herb gardens.

“When you live in the city and you see a space that’s yucky, you can make it more beautiful,” says Theresa Blaner, 33, who writes the blog D.C. Guerilla Gardeners. Like most guerrilla gardeners, she’s never been arrested for it. “But it would be awesome to have a [police] record for gardening,” she laughs.

**Short response questions (ANSWER ON NOTEBOOK PAPER, OR YOU WILL RECEIVE A ZERO!):**

1. What is guerilla gardening in your own words?

2. How did the author catch your attention in the first line of this story? Why would she start that way?

3. Write three sentences to a city police officer explaining why guerilla gardening shouldn’t be against the law. Tell them the benefits of it!

4. If you had some seed bombs, where would you be a guerilla gardener around Cary/Raleigh/Morrisville? Why?