

The green wars – B2/C1

Two friends take action to help the environment and create a beautiful green town. But what's the best strategy, and is it worth going to prison for?

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the text and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. a spade
2. guerrilla gardening
3. an allotment
4. vandalism
5. manure
6. deprived
7. bamboo
8. community service

Definition

- a. growing plants without permission on someone else's land or in a public space
- b. the crime of damaging property that belongs to other people
- c. work that someone has to do as punishment for committing a crime
- d. a tall tropical grass with hard, hollow stems
- e. solid waste from animals that is put round plants to help them grow
- f. a small piece of ground that a person can rent to grow fruit, vegetables and flowers
- g. not having the things that are necessary for a comfortable or happy life
- h. a tool used for digging, especially soil

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Plan 1: Guerrilla gardening

The time is what the military call 'oh-three-hundred-hours' – three o'clock in the morning. We're in the car park of the sports centre. It's totally empty except for me, my best friend, Janey and an old truck that belongs to the company that put grass on the town football pitch last week.

'What are we doing here?' I ask.

'Here's the plan,' says Janey. 'First, we borrow that truck ...'

'I'm going home,' I say. 'Good night.'

'Then, we drive to the Town Hall. And then we use the grass in the truck to cover the high street from top to bottom, like one great big garden. Ready?'

I think about it for a minute. Then I smile.

'OK,' I say. 'Let's go.'

...

Our new green high street is beautiful. But we don't have long to admire it. The judge says we're guilty of a crime. Several crimes in fact, including theft, vandalism and disturbing the peace. I get sentenced to 150 hours of community service and Janey gets 300 hours because it was her idea.

I stay out of trouble, do 150 hours cleaning graffiti and get back to my studies. Janey is planning how we're going to do our guerrilla gardening better in future. Our mission is to make the whole town green again. Janey's ideas will probably put us both in prison eventually. But someone needs to take urgent action to help the planet.

Plan 2: The bamboo forest

Every September, our town has a festival. There's a big parade through the city, with crowds of happy people eating junk food and waving little flags. Then everyone goes to the park on the edge of town, where the mayor gives a speech and everyone has fun.

I'm supposed to be packing my bags to go and study engineering at university, but as soon as everyone has gone to the park, Janey picks me up in another 'borrowed' truck. This one is loaded with soil and, judging by the smell, manure.

'Get in,' she says. 'There's enough soil here to cover the high street from Baker's Lane to Humber Road, right past the new shopping centre.'

When Janey gets an idea, she doesn't let it go easily.

'You're crazy,' I tell her.

'Crazy genius,' she says. 'I've mixed soil, manure and the fastest-growing variety of bamboo seeds you can order online. By the time the festival is over, there'll be a mini forest blocking the road to the supermarket. It really does grow that fast. What do you think?'

Well ... why not? I'll be at university next week anyway. 'Let's do it.'

...

Janey was right, bamboo does grow fast. It was knee-high before anyone discovered what we had done. By the time the council found someone to come and cut it down, our bamboo forest had grown taller than the mayor.

It was great, but they took it away. After what we did last year, no one had any doubt about who was responsible. Janey had taken the truck back, but the police traced the seed purchase to her bank account. This time she got six months in prison.

She didn't tell them I'd helped her, so I still went to university. By the time she got out, I'd changed my degree to Agriculture and Wildlife. I figured I should really devote some time to learning about gardening and stuff if Janey and I were going to succeed.

Plan 3: The vertical farm

I'm wearing my smartest business suit. My presentation is ready, and there's a scale model of my idea on the table. On the other side of the table, my three heads of department are ready to evaluate my final-year university project – the vertical farm.

I've seen what happens when we follow Janey's plans to make our town green. Now it's my turn.

'Good morning,' I say. 'During my studies I have specialised in theories of urban farming. After graduating, I want to do something practical with what I've learned.'

I point at the model in front of them. 'This is the high street of my home town. This is the Town Hall, this is our shopping centre and this is an old, multi-level car park which no one has used for the last two years and that is now for sale.'

I start the presentation so that they can see my designs on the big screen while I talk.

'I've designed a vertical farm based on the existing carpark structure. There will be eight floors of fruit and vegetable production. On the roof there will be rain collectors to water the soil, and solar panels to help power the special growing lights.'

The presentation changes to show charts of statistics and financial budgets.

'I will rent the space to small local farmers, and everything will be sold locally for a minimal carbon footprint. Also, the ninth floor will be allotments for any local people who want to grow their own food.'

My audience looks impressed, but I'm not finished yet.

'To prove the project can work, I've talked to local people and farmers, and I've received letters of support and interest from all sides. I also gave this presentation to my bank manager. We have agreed a business loan to cover all costs, as long as I can convince the council to sell me the site.'

I turn off the presentation. 'Are there any questions?'

...

I graduate from university with top marks.

But in the real world that doesn't count for anything.

Instead of accepting my plan, the council decided to sell the site to a property developer who will knock it down and build a load of luxury apartments. The mayor says they will bring new energy to the town. So much for the vertical farm.

Janey kept causing trouble while I was away. Fortunately, she was out of prison when I came back, so I met her for a drink and she showed me her new prison tattoos.

'You're an idiot for abandoning my strategy,' she tells me. 'Nothing sends our message better than blocking streets with earth and plants.'

Her latest trip to prison was for doing exactly that, again, whereas I'm a new university graduate with a bright future.

You'd think I'd have the sense to ignore her, wouldn't you?

Plan 4: Guerrilla gardening 2.0

This time, I agreed to do part of what Janey wanted.

We drive around town, searching for the ideal location. Not in front of the Town Hall or the shopping centre, none of the places Janey thinks will make the biggest statement. I think she's been choosing the wrong targets.

I'm looking for something different. Somewhere on the edge of town would be good. Not the best neighbourhood, but a deprived one, one that the council never invests in. One where the road surface is full of holes, and the pavement looks as if someone smashed it with hammers. I'm looking for somewhere the people don't have cars outside their houses, because no one has the money to own a car.

We find just the place.

One night, we arrive in another 'borrowed' truck and carefully fill the whole street with earth from one pavement to the other – classic Janey, just like all her plans. But this time, we plant vegetable gardens in front of every house. We post leaflets through people's doors with gardening instructions, so the lucky new owners will know what to do. The leaflets also explain how much money you can save if you grow your own food – you'd be surprised.

As a finishing touch, we put grass over those broken old pavements for the kids to play on, complete with a sign reading, 'Please Walk on the Grass'.

When we've finished, we're both covered in soil and completely exhausted. But Janey puts an arm around my shoulders.

'Not a bad plan, for you!' she says, smiling.

...

The town council is furious, of course. But would you believe that when they finally send people in to take the gardens away, the residents lock arms to form a human chain and refuse to let them through?

Just as I hoped, the people in this neighbourhood like what we've done to their street!

Later that day, the mayor himself goes to explain to them how what we did is a misuse of public property, and it's a crime. He isn't very pleased when a local TV reporter arrives to record the event.

The reporter asks him, 'This street hasn't been renovated for 20 years! Why don't you want it to be a place for growing food? Why can't it be a place for children to play and learn?'

It was the lead story on the national evening news and the whole town was thrilled. Well, everyone apart from the mayor, of course.

The night after that, Janey and I strike again – but this time we go in fast and hard. We just leave huge piles of earth at the top of 13 streets, along with spades, seeds and instructions piled on top of them.

People get the idea now, and we can't do all the work ourselves.

We manage three more nights of that before we get caught.

Plan 5: The right place to fight

So here I am, in prison.

It could be worse. It's my first crime, at least as an adult, so even though the plan was mostly my idea, my sentence wasn't too harsh. But Janey has quite a long criminal record now. When I get out of prison, she'll still have a couple of years left. She doesn't blame me though. As far as she's concerned, 'Guerrilla Gardening 2.0' was our most successful operation by far.

We're in separate buildings in prison, but we both work on the prison farm. We want to really make something of it. I start teaching Janey what I learned at university, and soon enough she's learned everything I can teach her.

When it's time for me to get out of prison, I know I'm leaving the farm in capable hands.

Janey says, 'Don't you worry. I'll keep things running here until you get yourself sent back in for your next green crime.'

That's not really part of my plan, though.

...

Do you remember those mountains of earth we left blocking streets all over town? Half of them are vegetable gardens now. The council doesn't like it, but we picked our targets well, and if there's one thing all politicians know, it's that they don't want to upset happy voters.

One thing I've learned is this:

If you want to win the battle, choose the right battleground.

The old mayor is retiring this year, you see. So the next time I try to re-green my town, I'll be running for election as mayor.

Last year I was a guerrilla gardener.

Next year I'll be the mayor. And our town will be the greenest place in the country.

Story written by Andrew Leon Hudson and adapted by Nicola Prentis.

Tasks

Task 1

Match the plans (1–5) with what happens (a–e).

Plan

- Plan 1: Guerrilla gardening
- Plan 2: The bamboo forest
- Plan 3: The vertical farm
- Plan 4: Guerrilla gardening 2.0
- Plan 5: The right place to fight

What happens

- Only Janey takes the blame for this plan.
- People in the town like this plan.
- The narrator thinks he has learned something important that will make this plan work.
- The narrator is surprised when this plan doesn't work.
- They create a big garden on the high street.

Task 2

Are the sentences true or false?

	Answer	
1. The first plan is Janey's idea.	True	False
2. The truck they use belongs to the narrator.	True	False
3. When Janey goes to prison for the first time, the narrator goes to university.	True	False
4. The vertical farm plan includes nine floors for farmers to grow food.	True	False
5. The narrator gets a bad mark from the university for the vertical farm project.	True	False
6. Guerrilla gardening 2.0 targeted the wrong people.	True	False
7. Janey and the narrator can continue gardening in prison.	True	False
8. The narrator's final plan involves committing a crime.	True	False

Discussion

Did you like the story? Do you think Plan 5 will work?

Answers

Preparation task

1. h
2. a
3. f
4. b
5. e
6. g
7. d
8. c

Task 1

1. e
2. a
3. d
4. b
5. c

Task 2

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. False
5. False
6. False
7. True
8. False