

The poppy estate

John Little who, with his brother Robert, began maintaining the grounds around the Clapton Park Estate in 2002. Introducing wild flowers has transformed the look of the area; the residents now love it

COMMUNITY GARDENING

FROM THE OUTSIDE, the Clapton Park Estate in Hackney, East London, looks similar to many other inner-city developments. There is a mix of medium and low-rise flats, a couple of tower blocks and a shopping square where children tend to loiter. The 1,200 properties are an enduring reminder of the early 1970s, and your instinct, based on driving through many all-too-similar estates, is that there is little chance of being bowled over by unusual plantings or colourful flower displays.

When I visited last year, however, my preconceptions were dashed. Turning into the estate from Redwald Road, opposite a 20-storey tower block and directly below a three-storey block of flats where several England supporters' flags fluttered in the breeze, I saw a dramatic sweep of red flowers flourishing – a mass of corn poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*) that completely filled every gap in an 18m-long border.

'This really defines the look of Clapton Park and is the reason why local kids call it the poppy estate,' says John Little who, along with his younger sibling Robert, is responsible for the estate's 120 areas of green space, many of which boast an equally striking show of colour. Together, the brothers run the Grass Roof Company, actually based some 30 miles away at Horndon on the Hill, Essex, which also maintains the grounds around several primary schools, using similar techniques and palettes of plants (see p325) to those used on the estate.

The company successfully bid for the estate's ground-maintenance contract in



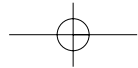
The removal of a neglected rose bed has allowed some residents to grow their own vegetables (above)

2002. At the time, John and Robert had no experience of grounds maintenance, but had been employed by the previous contractor to carry out some work on the estate. 'We had got on really well with the residents,' says John. 'When the tender came up, the tenants' group asked us if we wanted to apply. As they were such a nice bunch of people, we did.'

The green spaces they inherited were mainly laid to grass, with bare strips of earth around the edges that were usually sprayed several times a year with herbicide in order to keep the weeds down. 'It looked so boring and, on the first day we arrived, I wondered whether we'd made the right decision as I couldn't bear the thought of just cutting grass,' he says.

Rather than continue the old regime of spraying off weeds, John decided to experiment with sowing wildflower seeds instead, hoping it would provide colour, reduce watering and stifle weed growth. 'We didn't consult anyone before doing it, but simply sowed a native cornfield flower mix in a patch outside a block of flats and waited for ▶

Urban East London may seem an unlikely place to see thriving cornfield plants but, thanks to groundsman John Little, the Clapton Park Estate is awash with flowers, as Martyn Cox found. Photography by Jane Sebire



COMMUNITY GARDENING



'WHETHER YOU ARE WAITING AT THE BUS STOP OR JUST LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW, SEEING ALL THE COLOUR HELPS LIFT YOUR SPIRITS'

Residents in the Clapton Park Estate, East London now enjoy gardening, whether by growing vegetables (above) or admiring the naturalised annual flowers (above right)

it to bloom. The residents loved it. John has largely given up spraying now and sows seeds wherever he can.

Walk around the estate in early summer and you see flowers growing everywhere. Pockets of land, of various shapes and sizes, are filled with a range of seed mixes, whether it is the classic cornfield mix with the now ubiquitous poppies or more jazzy combinations of flowers, including bright orange California poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*) and purple tansy (*Phacelia tanacetifolia*). In some places he has added perennials and grasses to borders for a more permanent backbone.

Elsewhere, there is space for some of the 5,000 residents to grow fruit and vegetables. 'There are big West Indian and Turkish communities here and they wanted to grow food. They'd rather look at vegetables than roses, so we took out a miserable row of hybrid teas behind some flats, dug over the soil and helped



them plant it up,' says John. Herb beds have been built, and everyone is encouraged to pick the produce.

So, have there been any problems? 'Occasionally flowers get flattened by a football or we might find a mattress has been dumped on a bed,' says John. 'We're not precious about it. We grow so many flowers here that even if half of them were destroyed you probably wouldn't be able to tell.'

John's work is possible due to the particular way the estate is run. In 1994 Clapton Park became the first (there are now 12) estate in the London Borough of Hackney to be managed by a Tenant Management Organisation, giving it complete autonomy to govern its own affairs. Each year the Council gives it a spending budget that must fund everything from making building repairs to offering welfare and benefits advice, along with maintaining the areas of open space. In the past, a contractor would have to tender for the whole borough, and not just a single estate, which would be an impossible undertaking for most small businesses.

'I think that's why the gardening around council and social housing is often so dull,' says John. 'Contractors have a lot to look after, while we can really focus on what we are doing.'

It is clear that the locals enjoy the flowers. A passer-by calls out 'keep up the good work', while Adele Shuster, who has lived on the estate for more than 30 years, says it has improved people's lives immensely. 'Whether you are waiting at the bus stop or just looking out the window, seeing all the colour helps lift your spirits,' she says.

Perhaps this venture's biggest achievement is in cultivating greater respect for the neighbourhood. Jan Cowdell, treasurer of the residents' committee, says, 'John planted up some flower beds in the shopping square and several of the plants were pulled up. Residents quickly replaced them and the youths could see we wanted to look after the flowers, and now they don't mess around with them at all. If something looks nice, people try to keep it nice, but if it looks awful, then they tend to not care about it.'

Relying largely on annuals means the estate is a colourful spectacle for only a few weeks, from late spring to about the middle of July, but for the residents length of flowering is unimportant. For them, the effects of having colour, if only for a short time, is a welcome antidote to the bland patches of grass that litter the estate. Here, among the bricks and mortar of an estate in East London, is a project that will give hope to urban communities everywhere. ■

Martyn Cox has a small garden in East London and writes a gardening column in *The Mail on Sunday*

? **What do you think?** What examples of innovative communal gardening do you know? Write to: The Garden, 4th Floor, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT. Email: thegarden@rhs.org.uk. Please include a postal address

i **The Grass Roof Company:** 01375 643576; www.grassroofcompany.co.uk

@ **Britain in Bloom:** to transform your local area and get the community active, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/britaininbloom

SCHOOLS IN FLOWER

John and Robert Little's firm The Grass Roof Company maintains the grounds of several schools, including the Aveley Primary School in Essex. Areas that were once sprayed to control weeds now have a thriving community of wild flowers. The displays continue at the rear of the school with a wildflower meadow and pond. John has developed a good rapport with the children, some of whom do not have a garden at home. 'The aim is to get the kids outside,' he says. 'Since we began work here, enthusiasm for gardening has spread around the school.' Indeed, the school now has a gardening club.

SOWING SEEDS

In late winter, several weeks before sowing, John initially sprays the soil with a glyphosate-based herbicide to remove annual weeds. Seeds are broadcast in early spring, then raked into the surface. To prevent the seed bed being scuffed up by children playing ball games, it is compacted by foot after sowing to ensure a firm surface. Apart from removing weeds, the display is not touched until midsummer. After flowering, plants are allowed to set seed - growth is then raked off and the waste composted.

What seed mixes are used?

• **Classic mixture** contains *Centaurea cyanus* (cornflower), *Chrysanthemum segetum* (corn marigold), *Anthemis arvensis* (corn chamomile) and *Papaver rhoeas* (corn poppy).

This mix is available from Landlife Wildflowers at the National Wildflower Centre in Liverpool, minimum order 10g. 0151 7371819; www.wildflower.org.uk.

• **Economy seed mix** provides flowers summer to autumn. It contains native and non-natives including corn poppy, cornflower, corn marigold, tickseed, California poppy and *Linaria maroccana* (toadflax).

• **Contrasting mix** has shades of orange, yellow and blue. Flowers include cornflower, *Linum perenne* (blue flax) and *Delphinium ajacis* (rocket larkspur). Both the above (and other mixtures) are available from Pictorial Meadows of Sheffield, minimum order 50g - enough to cover around 25sq m. 0114 276 2828; www.pictorialmeadows.co.uk.



Many children from schools where John maintains the grounds have started to show an appreciation for gardening

