

Young guns of guerrilla gardening hit the Hebrides

Islanders are embracing a community gardens revolution that took root in the tough neighbourhoods of Los Angeles

Julia Horton

The Outer Hebrides are arguably more Compton Mackenzie than Compton, California. However, while the remote Scottish archipelago is a world away from Los Angeles's notorious gangland housing schemes, islanders are imitating the success of a pioneering "guerrilla gardening revolution" that helps urban US communities tackle social issues such as poverty, hunger, violence and substance abuse.

The uplifting documentary *Can You Dig This* – which charts how planting vegetables in tough neighbourhoods of southern LA has given troubled youngsters and older ex-cons a source of healthy food, pride and an alternative to crime – was shown last week at the Hebrides International Film Festival on Uist, where a similar idea has taken root successfully.

The "grow your own community" initiative, which has received Scottish government funding, is aimed at people living in social housing. It currently helps about 50 people who are dealing with problems such as financial hardship and loneliness, while reducing their carbon footprint by cutting the need to buy food.

Organisers hope that showing the film on Uist, where director Delila Vallot also gave a talk, and another screening in Lewis yesterday, will help convince the younger generation of the benefits of the Hebridean version of the initiative.

Standing among an array of tomato plants in Benbecula at one of the five sites across the isles, Laura Donkers, project leader for charity Tagsa Uibhist, said: "I think it's clear from the film that people's connection with growing is universal.

"There are also similarities [between south LA and the Hebrides] including

some of the social problems, such as isolation and poverty, and the restrictions which people in rented accommodation can face on what they're allowed to grow.

"Many of the people who come here are over 50. If we don't encourage younger people to learn to grow their own food too that knowledge will go."

The award-winning US singer-songwriter John Legend is the executive producer of the documentary, which also features an engaging former drug dealer and convicted robber turned gardening enthusiast among the LA guerrilla gardeners.

Vallot, whose childhood was divided between south LA and Hollywood, said: "I had thought that being disconnected from our food was just an LA thing, but the community gardening scheme here [in the Hebrides] is serving much of the same purposes as the one in LA."

The man who launched LA's urban gardening movement, Ron Finley, began by growing vegetables and flowers on the strip of land outside his house.

When city authorities threatened legal action if he did not restore the area to grassland, he took on the moniker of guerrilla gardener and eventually helped win a change of policy that allowed residents to grow their own vegetables.

Speaking about the film, Finley said: "Some people call these neighbourhoods food deserts. I call them food prisons because you need permission to do everything in prison ... I became an outlaw for planting carrots."

Thriving community gardens in LA now feature raised beds where people grow everything from squash to strawberries, and in future Finley hopes any gang fights would be "about who can grow the biggest tomato".

While the LA gardens are outdoors,

ALAMY



Younger people in the Outer Hebrides, particularly those in social housing, are being encouraged to grow their own food



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the Hebridean versions are in polytunnels covered in a kind of bubble wrap to protect them from lashing wind and rain.

Crime in the Hebrides is so low that it is not uncommon for people to leave their cars and homes unlocked, and the kinds of gangs and drug dealing which blight LA are a far cry from island life.

But while Mackenzie's classic comedy *Whisky Galore* – about the antics of islanders when a ship loaded with the spirit is wrecked – was fictional, it was inspired by real events, and alcoholism has been a lasting problem among Scotland's remote communities.

Scotland's first communal home plan for over-50s

One of the UK's first communal housing schemes for the over-50s is set to be built in Scotland, in a move which campaigners say could lead to happier and longer lives, writes Julia Horton.

Called a co-living community, the American model project is aimed at active divorcees, those who have been widowed young and others who would rather enjoy the social side of sharing a space with people they do not yet know but who do not need the care regime of retirement housing.

Facilities at what sounds like posh student halls of residence, which developers plan to build on a site in Bearsden, near Glasgow, will include hotel-style rooms with kitchenettes while communal amenities will include a cinema, a library and a restaurant, where residents can hire a chef for private dinner parties.

Campaigners welcomed the move which they said could help people live longer, happier lives by reducing loneliness among the growing ageing population.

Structured Housing Group (SHG), which is set to secure planning permission to build the complex, hopes it will provide a new kind of home

for about 60 to 90 over-50s by the end of next year.

Craig Inglis, SHG chief executive, said the high quality communal apartment blocks – based on similar schemes in America – were a response to the zeitgeist.

He said: "This is about enjoying a stage of your life with similar people. I think there is a real demand from those in their 50s or 60s, a lot of whom are widowed or divorced and feel lonely, but who don't need care."

"At the moment people stay in their own home when they don't need all that space and go into a nursing home when they need care."

Keith Robson, Age Scotland chief executive for charity services, said the charity is "delighted to see projects such as this which bring people together and create a sense of community".

Other communal living apartment blocks are due to be developed by SHG in London, Manchester and Plymouth, backed by £1bn of investment from a Chicago-based developer, Harrison Street.

Some will be designed for the over-50s, while others will be aimed workers on short-term contracts.

Rent would cost from about £150 a week.

ANYA SEMENOFF



Developers' US-inspired communal living for Bearsden

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