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Take gardening to new heights: Rooftop sanctuaries

By MARTY ROSS
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Rooftop gardens take the enjoyment of plants to a new level.

But creating a garden so far off the ground poses plenty of challenges.

"There are very few bug problems up here, but the other day the wind knocked over one of my pines, and it fell right into a container of daylilies," says Wendy Powell, who lives on the sixth floor of the Crestwood Condominiums in Brookside. "That's one of the keys of rooftop container gardens — the ability to understand the elements, especially the wind and the dry spells. There is a learning curve."

Powell gave up a large and beautiful garden on Ward Parkway when she and her husband moved to the Brookside complex four years ago. Now she has a stylish and sophisticated garden of herbs, vegetables, fruit trees and colorful perennials, all growing in pots and planters on southeast-facing terraces above the treetops of the neighborhood.

Cars rush by on the boulevards below while gardeners on rooftops and terraces enjoy the unusual perspectives offered by the setting. These gardens have a mood all their own. Because they are much smaller than the average backyard, they challenge gardeners to think about what is really essential, and the results can be unexpected and extremely striking.

Just like gardens on the ground, rooftop and balcony gardens are "an escape from everything else that's chaotic," says Bill Jennings, a garden designer and co-owner of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. Jennings and his partner, Richard Triggs, worked with Powell on the design and planting of her old garden on Ward Parkway and then helped create her new garden 60 feet above the streets of Brookside.

A rooftop or balcony garden demands a good design, Jennings says. Pots and planters should be an appropriate size (bigger is better), and they should be arranged to take advantage of the space and look attractive from inside. Powell's plants all grow in sleek black pots and troughs.

"They're minimalistic," Jennings says, and there's a reason. "If the container itself is simple, you can do some exciting things with the plants."

Jeffrey Bruce, designer of the 17,000-square-foot rooftop garden shared by residents of 909 Walnut downtown, chose what he calls "bullet-proof" plants for the space. The garden, on top of an eight-story parking garage, includes a thriving fescue lawn, private sitting areas under pergolas and a line of trees that creates a street-side effect in the sky. The garden was designed to allow residents to enjoy parklike surroundings without leaving home.

Russian sage, Knock Out roses, daylilies and astilbes all thrive in the unexpected rooftop garden, which has won regional and national awards for its design. Residents use it as their own backyard, manager Lisa Matthews says. There have been weddings in the space. "There are parties up there all the time," she says.

Bruce calls the green roof a "recreational deck" with environmental benefits. The greenery keeps the area much cooler in summer than it otherwise would be, he says, and it intercepts about 75 percent of rainfall, significantly reducing stormwater runoff. It also helps absorb the sounds of the city, and it provides a natural habitat for birds and butterflies.

The plants grow in a highly engineered, 6-inch layer of sandy soil on top of a Styrofoam base. Nothing is in containers. Daffodils bloom in spring; Amur maples along the edge of the roof are ablaze with color in the fall.

Such downtown gardens “make you feel more friendly toward the city,” says Ellen Zachos, who designs rooftop gardens in New York City and teaches classes on the subject for the New York Botanic Garden. “You need a garden in the city, something to satisfy your yearning for nature.”

Zachos has been working with rooftop gardens and gardeners for 13 years, since she and her husband planted their first vegetable garden on the roof of an apartment building. “We drilled a tiny hole in our bathroom window and ran drip irrigation up there and planted everything in grow bags,” she says. “It was one of the best crops I’ve ever had. The vegetables were blissfully happy.”

Drip irrigation is essential to a thriving garden on a rooftop, she says. Plants in pots dry out more quickly than plants in the ground, and plants exposed to hot sun and desiccating winds are particularly vulnerable. Drip irrigation lets you water plants without soaking the terrace, and it lets you control just how much moisture each plant receives — the tomatoes and roses can receive more water than the sedums, for example.

Zachos insists on hard-working plants for rooftop gardens, because space is so precious. “You need every plant to give you double or triple duty,” she says. She relies on ferns, hostas, yarrow and other plants with beautiful foliage to keep her New York clients’ gardens interesting all season long. She loves hydrangeas and small Japanese maples. Peonies are not a good choice.

“This year, two clients asked me for peonies, and I put one in for each of them, but I know they are going to take them out next year,” she says. They are susceptible to powdery mildew and will not thrive.

When Earl and Joan Adam moved into their sixth-floor space in the Crestwood Condominiums, they reluctantly dug up the peonies around their home in Atchison, Kan., and gave them to their niece. On the terrace of their new condo, Earl Adam built a pergola to provide some shelter from the southwestern sun, and the couple planted trees and shrubs in pots to soften the edges of their large space.

“The good news for us here is we have a lot more sun than we had before,” Joan Adam says. “We have a lot of lavender, and before I could never get it to grow well. It looks great all summer.” They also chose colorful Knock Out roses, boxwoods, daylilies, veronica, pincushion flowers, herbs and a few salad greens.

Rooftop gardening is a big change but a pleasant one, Joan says. Instead of looking back, she looks down, up and all around. On the roof, there’s no grass to mow, there are no mosquitoes to swat, and the outlook is terrific.

INSTALLATION: GARDEN TO ROOF

Brian Kinney of H&R Lawn and Landscape used heavy equipment and a lot of coordination to install the rooftop garden at 909 Walnut. But for most balcony gardeners, you’ll need to make just a few trips in the elevator. Ignore the funny looks from the neighbors.

Here are some suggestions.

- KC garden designer Bill Jennings, owner of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, likes using large pots, where possible. “Two great containers are more effective than 60 so-so containers,” he says. He lines pots with coco fiber (available at garden shops). It keeps the roots cool and provides insulation in the winter.
- Stick to soil-less potting soil mixes, which are lightweight and designed to drain well and retain moisture. Jennings uses Fertilome potting soil; compost will stain the deck, he says.
- When choosing plants, start small. If you can’t get it in your car, you won’t be able to get it up the elevator or the stairs, anyway.
- Trees or tall plants in pots may need to be attached to railings to keep them from blowing over; bungee cords will do the trick.
- A watering can or a hose may be all you need, but consider installing drip irrigation, especially for large rooftop gardens. Garden shops can help with DIY drip systems and suggestions.

HIGH-RISE PLANTS

Plants on balcony or roof spaces are exposed to extreme conditions, but many will thrive if you choose carefully and take care of them. Here are plants that designers and local gardeners have grown up high with success.

•**Trees:** Choose smaller trees and little-leaf varieties, Jeffrey Bruce suggests. Amur maples do well on the rooftop at 909 Walnut. Other good choices are Japanese tree lilac (*Syringa reticulata*), Japanese maples, staghorn sumac and crabapples.

•**Evergreens:** Pines, junipers and dwarf conifers.

•**Shrubs:** Boxwoods, cotoneaster, Japanese kerria, hydrangeas, barberry and yew.

•**Roses:** All kinds are fine in pots. Earl and Joan Adam grow Zephirine Drouhin, a climbing rose, and Knock Out, a long-blooming shrub rose.

•**Perennials:** Try hostas, ferns, astilbe, daylilies, lavender, yarrow and Artemisia. Ellen Zachos, a rooftop garden designer in New York, likes Mexican feather grass (*Stipa tenuissima*) for its terrific texture and small size. Sedums and sempervivums are also great choices.

•**Annuals:** Some hard-working, colorful choices include zinnias, pentas, lantanas, marigolds, petunias, torenias and impatiens. Annual vines, such as cypress vine and morning glory, will grow rapidly and bloom through fall.

•**Vegetables:** Tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, zucchini, broccoli and lettuce and greens are good candidates for life in pots. Herbs also thrive in containers. Wendy Powell grows strawberries and raspberries in big troughs.

DESIGN ON HIGH

Start with just sitting outside, taking in the sights. Study the light and shadows during the day, and decide whether you need sun- or shade-loving plants. Assess the views: You might want to hide utility poles with plants, or line up pots to frame the view of dramatic rooftops nearby.

If you need shade, consider putting up a pergola or making a place for a spreading tree in a pot.

Choose pots that complement each other. Consider texture when you buy plants.

“A collage of blues and greens works together well in Wendy Powell’s garden,” garden designer Bill Jennings says. “Having an eclectic group of plants makes it more interesting.”

Small water features are perfectly appropriate, and garden ornaments are great in a rooftop garden because they’ll never outgrow the limited space.

RESOURCES

•**A Tree Grows in Brooklyn** garden design, Bill Jennings and Richard Triggs, 816-453-1246

•**Jeffrey L. Bruce & Co.**, landscape architects, 816-842-8999, www.jlbruce.com

•**H&R Lawn and Landscape**, 913-897-9705, www.handrlawn.com

•**Ellen Zachos**, New York garden designer and author, owner of Acme Plant Stuff, www.acmeplant.com

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