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Manhattan's Masters of the Universe

Drinking coffee and basking in the sunshine on Philip Roche's New York roof garden, you feel like one of those Masters of the Universe in Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*. The city is at your feet, a private, multi-million dollar panorama of skyscrapers reflected in the East River, and from the lounge chairs and bowers of exotic plants you can watch the worker ants below battling it out in the noise and congestion.

In fact, this Long Island neighbourhood isn't a swanky one. Roche's apartment is part of an old iron foundry and below is the warehouse where he runs Plant Specialists Inc, which designs, installs and maintains roof gardens across Manhattan. An engaging young New Zealander, Roche joined the company 11 years ago - "It was supposed to be just a holiday job, but I never left," he says. Then, last February, he and his business partner were offered the chance to buy out its founders, Tim and Dagny DuVal. The DuVals still own the adjacent apartment and they all share the garden.

"The roof garden is entirely Dagny's brainchild. In fact, she says the only thing we guys do out here is drink," Roche says. Old Chinese paving slabs, interspersed with weathered stones and cobbles, make a varied ground pattern and provide generous space for entertaining. A rusty iron gear-wheel from the foundry has been converted into a water tank, out of which spurts a fountain of papyrus. Mouth-watering tender shrubs, perennials and annuals sprout in every direction - among them, a curtain of climbing pink mandevilla, purple-saucered tibouchina grown as standards and masses of coloured-leaved coleus, succulents and sweet-potato vines (*Ipomoea batatas*). It is sad to hear that most of them end up in the compost come autumn.

This display is part of a mammoth bedding operation, fuelled by a giant container-load of plants Roche's company brings up from Florida every spring, which accounts for 50 per cent of the plants in some of their clients' gardens. This sounds extravagant, Roche admits, but it capitalises on the long, hot and humid New York summer. What's more, winter here is bitterly cold, which severely restricts the range of plants you can leave outdoors. "Japanese maples and a number of conifers and rhododendrons are very hardy, as is wisteria. But there really aren't many interesting broad-leaved shrubs we can use reliably, especially evergreens. Among perennials, hostas are great, but agapanthus definitely has to be treated as an annual."

In reality, the logistics of putting any sort of garden on a Manhattan rooftop sound pretty terrifying. "To start with, there's the parking," says Roche. "Our vehicles collect \$2,000 worth of parking tickets a month. Then there's the matter of getting the materials on to the roof, all by hand, and often up a series of tiny elevators. The first garden I did, I carried all the pieces right up as far as the kitchen, but they wouldn't fit any further. It's a mistake you only make once."

Structurally, I would think many roof gardens are disasters waiting to happen, aren't they? "To avoid trouble, a lot of time is spent determining weight and point loading, and projects have to be signed off by an engineer. Legally, everyone wants to cover themselves," says Roche.



Even with a rubber membrane, however, sooner or later, surely you must get leaks and water stains appearing in the apartment below? “Clients are made aware that roof gardens have a finite lifespan, about 15 years. With re-potting and root-pruning every five years, the plants can last indefinitely. But the rest of the garden needs to be removed and repaired.”

It sounds expensive - and is. “Roof gardening is not for the weak of heart. You’ve got to be either a real enthusiast, or not mind writing cheques.”

How much would I expect to spend? “It depends. A little balcony might be \$10,000 (£5,300), a big garden \$100,000. I know one roof garden that cost \$250,000, and that’s not including the swimming pool.”

On top of that, some people spend \$5,000 a month on maintenance. But Plant Specialists will also look after clients’ indoor flowers and party decorations. Over the years, it has carved out a sizeable chunk of the market and built up an impressive client base among New York’s rich and famous. Wolfe’s Masters of the Universe would be impressed.