



Garden Design - October 2005

Decor - Creative Ideas in Exterior Decorating



“There is a great opportunity for Western gardeners to learn from the Eastern aesthetic,” says Nathan Schofer. As a landscape designer for the venerable New York roofscapr gardening firm Plant Specialists, Schofer practices what he preaches on a rooftop in Manhattan. “To my mind, the correct approach is to look at how gardens are laid out in the East and understand how the East uses ornaments in the garden,” he explains. “Too often it just means imitation—and someone sticks a Japanese lantern into a setting. So use antiques with restraint, restraint being one of the key elements I have learned from Japanese gardens and an element essential to the development of this garden in particular.”

**Function:** This Manhattan rooftop flips from a private hideaway to a place in progress—a personal expression, a contemplative garden for an otherwise extremely busy New York City businesswoman who lives here. The space was originally designed in 1998 by Kate Webster, then with Suzman Design Associates in San Francisco.



**Form:** “I call the space a bonsai because it is a small, ever-changing work of natural art in an unnatural setting,” explains Nathan Scofer, who now collaborates on the project. He is the rising star of Philip Roche’s Long Island City-based Plant Specialists, which for some 30 years has been specializing in the acrobaticts, high design and maintenance of New York City’s roofscapes.

**Style:** “Contemporary, ASian-themed,” explains Scofer. “It is a respectful



translation of the concept of Japanese garden making rather than an imitation of the style. You need to match the style of the garden to where it is, not imagine yourself in Kyoto.”

**Ornaments:** Kate Webster designed panels decorated with copper grass motifs. Like and unlike shoji screens, they were never meant to conceal anything. Later, the client and Schofer came up with the idea of a Japanese rain chain. Here, where the only roof is the sky, a blue glass puddle marks the spot where water gathered by a rain chain from the roof would have collected.

**Plant Materials:** Japanese wisteria creates a privacy fence. Mounded sedum suggests a miniature forest. A potted Japanese maple, blood grass and a stone suggest a *tokonoma*—an interior niche for ikebana and bonsai. Explains Schofer, a bonsai specialist, “Because bonsai face the same problems that rooftop trees confront, I find that approach to rooftop gardening very useful in our work.”

**Bonus:** “The discovery,” says Schofer, “the garden making is about the interaction between gardener and garden—and to admit that nature is constantly changing.”

