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Feathering the Nest Outdoors by Martha Baker

In a city like New York, every square foot of open space is a treasured commodity, and nobody appreciates that fact more than urban gardeners. As a breed they're a hearty lot, highly adaptable and ready to overcome obstacles; in these respects they are not so different from the gardens they create. And create them they do: in window boxes, on terraces, in brownstone yards no bigger than a hankie and on rooftops- especially on rooftops (as an aerial view of New York City will bear out)

The challenges facing a rooftop gardener here are legion. Daylong exposure to brutal sunlight, unfettered winds, air pollution, shallow soil, not to mention the city ordinances regarding weight allowances, water restrictions and a myriad of other safety factors – it's enough to make most gardeners throw in the trowel. But the prodigious effort is well worth the reward- a garden with panoramic views like few others in the world.

When a garden sprouts from a rooftop, it acts as a forecourt to everything around it, so that the view becomes part of the garden itself. (The Chinese call the concept 'borrowing the landscape') one particularly fine example of the phenomenon is the rooftop garden of Tim and Dagny Du Val, who design and install urban gardens through their company, Plant Specialists.

Several years ago, when the company was forced to move from its' Manhattan location, the Du Val's search for a new space led them to Long Island City, Queens. There they found the ideal site: a mid- 19th century metal foundry housed in a complex of two-story brick buildings covering an entire city block.

With more than enough space for their needs, the couple reserved a portion of it (along with the foundry's original cobblestone courtyard) for themselves and their company, then converted the rest into small business spaces and European-style ateliers for artists. Today, a Starbucks commissary, Authentico, which caters Mexican food, and a Turkish bakery co-exists with Edwina von Gal, a landscape architect, and Tom Penn, a sculptor and the son of the photographer Irving Penn.

Four years the Du Val's roof garden remained an on-and-off again affair. 'It started out as an orphanage,' Ms Du Val explained, 'a place for salvaging cast off plants.' But once the garden became permanent, it turned into what she called a nonstop evolution.

From the very beginning, the Du Val's intent was to maximize the view, which encompasses the adjacent Queensboro Bridge and an uninterrupted sweep of Manhattan skyline. Another plus was the rooftops generous footage – about 2500 square feet. To divide it into 'rooms,' they defined discreet areas with different floor materials: Mexican beach pebbles around a fountain in the garden proper, black cast concrete pavers in the cooking area, lighter concrete-and-pebble pavers in the living and entertaining section and cedar planking in the dining room. (The materials can usual be found at garden-supply stores.) Then, to delineate transitional roots from one area to the next, they created a series of teak walkways.



Before any of the floor plan could be put into place, however, the roof had to be covered with a ceiling membrane – it might be a silicone sealant, rubber or asphalt – to prevent water damage and protect the structural integrity of the building. To keep the membrane from being punctured, the couple had to make sure that everything they put on top of it – flooring frame, irrigation pipes, paving, pots and furnishings – was lightweight and distributed evenly over the surface. On top of that, the roof had a 2 percent gradient, a common construction element intended to expedite drainage, and just enough slope to make one leg feel longer than the other and set plants and furniture at a jaunty tilt. To level the surface, the Du Vals installed feet, or pods, that screwed into the frame on which the flooring was laid.

(Another approach they might have considered is pre-cast pedestal pavers: paving squares that have adjustable built-in feet. They're laid with open spaces between them to allow for water run off.)

To provide for shade, a must for a rooftop garden the Du Val's conceived a wood-beamed pergola entwined with fragrant wisteria. The vine is still in its infancy, but when full grown, it will cover the structure like a lacy mantel. New – growth trees, shade for future summers, include rooftop favorites, like river birches, black pines and Japanese cut-leaf maples, as well as the delightful surprise of Colorado quaking aspens. A reminder of Ms Duval's childhood, aspens are very hard to find here, but seem to do well. "I've always loved the way their leaves shimmer in the wind," she said.

Other hardy plants on the roof include shrubs like Virginia sweetspire, rhododendron and boxwood; perennials like lavender, roses, cat's whiskers and pennisetum grass, and annuals like plumbago, Martha Washington geraniums and clerodendrum. Vines thrive here, as well: green blankets of Boston ivy mellow the old brick walls, and passifloras send their wayward tendrils up wall trellises and up the projectile – shaped tuteur Ms Duval fashioned from copper plumbing pipe (a contrivance she refers to as the rocket ship).

In warm-weather months, the Du Val's rooftop is well equipped for entertaining. All the furniture – from the teak ocean-liner deck chairs to the steel-topped dining table – is weatherproofed and meant to last a lifetime. But it was also chosen for its lightness in respect for the weight-bearing limitations of the roof itself.

(New York City codes restrict weight on a roof to 40 to 60 pounds per square foot, depending on the structure of the building, and that includes people, pots, plants and pets.)

Dinner parties aren't the only entertainments provided for here. To amuse bird-watcher, there are feeders that attract dove couples, finches, larks, hummingbirds, mocking birds – even the odd parakeet. To induce serenity, there's a fountain made from an old gear mechanism, a remnant of the foundries earlier life as a machine-parts manufactory. Mr. Du Val drilled a hole in the bottom to insert a cord for a pump, then sealed the entry hole with silicone. There's even an overflow pipe to correct the water level – a handy device for coping with heavy rains.

Finally, for warmth on chilly nights there's an outdoor fireplace. It is, in fact, a flue-topped barbecue, but the Du Vals like to use it solely as a hearth – and given the pure enchantment of that idea in a roof top setting who could blame them?