



Up on the roof

Annie Novak manages Eagle Street Rooftop Farm, a 6,000-square-foot organic vegetable farm on top of a warehouse in Brooklyn, New York. The food is sold to local restaurants and at an on-site farm market on Sundays. The farm also holds free lectures on subjects from composting to chicken-keeping.

GREEN STREETS

Stressed urbanites are turning to the countryside for inspiration. From urban farms to rooftop parks, we discover the best city oases

Words **EMMA LOVE**

A green revolution is sweeping through our cities. As overworked urbanites fight to regain some 'slow time' and reconnect with nature, outdoor spots for growing your own, relaxing or even beekeeping are springing up. 'The more we're away from nature, the more we feel the need to be connected to it,' says Alex Mitchell, author of *The Edible Balcony* (Kyle Cathie, £16.99), aimed at would-be food growers with limited space. Making the most of window boxes and roof gardens doesn't just save on the supermarket shop, it feeds our nostalgia for the 'good life' – an idyllic past when food was seasonal and locally sourced. And more green space also means cleaner air and a habitat for wildlife.

The 'urban farm' movement has a wider impact, too: people are reclaiming derelict public spaces. Neglected wasteland and rooftops are being transformed into edible gardens that everyone can enjoy, as 'guerrilla gardening' – an underground trend involving enthusiastic gardeners sowing plants around

a city – takes hold. 'People want to garden even if they don't have the land,' says Richard Reynolds, founder of guerillagardening.org. 'It can be as simple as "pimping a pavement" by planting a sunflower seed next to a tree on your street.' Richard has curated windows for Grow, a temporary shop in Selfridges' London Wonder Room celebrating gardening and the growing of food, with cool brands Petersham Nurseries, SeedBom and Pimp My Pavement.

A resurgent interest in where food comes from is driving people to grow more of it. 'You may not be self-sufficient, but you can grow things that taste better than shop produce,' says Alex Mitchell. Even restaurants are cottoning on: Acorn House in King's Cross has its own roof garden filled with salad greens and herbs (see p122 for more on the eatery).

If we use our resources cleverly, brightening up the streets in the process, it seems we city dwellers can have the best of both worlds. *'Grow' at Selfridges runs until the end of April (selfridges.com)*

What's the purpose of the garden?

In New York, we have issues with storm water drainage and excess rainwater gathering, so having a green space helps soak up some of that water from the roof. And we grow great food, too.

What do you grow? We focus on crops that are suitable for roof growth, and which can tolerate the heat of a New York summer. This year, we're concentrating on cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes and herbs – we're planning to make our own pickles and hot sauces with them!

Does it take a lot of time to look after?

We have about six apprentices working on the garden and extra volunteers on Sundays. I think of it as a part-time project. When people see the farm for the first time, they often want to do something similar themselves, and it's more encouraging if we can say 'here's how you do a smaller version of this for a couple of days a week'. We also use drip irrigation, as it's lower maintenance than normal overhead watering – and more environmentally friendly.

What advice would you give someone starting an urban garden? Plant the things you love to eat, because that will encourage you to take care of them! ► rooftopfarms.org

Field of dreams

Justin Bere is an eco architect who lives and works from his three-bedroom house in the London borough of Islington. It's built according to PassivHaus principles, which means its temperature is managed through heat recovery ventilation, solar energy and insulation. Bere's 'rooftop reserve' – a modern take on a wildflower meadow – recreates natural ecology in the middle of the city.

What do you grow? My garden focuses on native British species, from foxgloves, dog's mercury and wild meadow flowers to hawthorn, hazel and wisteria. Blackbirds, cold tits and bumblebees are equally welcome – we have a beehive on the rooftop and built-in bird boxes for nesting.

What's the purpose of the garden? I love nature, but for me it's about more than just bringing the countryside to the city. I believe that we need to look after nature if we want nature to look after us.

Does it take a lot of time to look after? Because so much of what I grow is found in the wild, it's low-maintenance. Having installed a leaky pipe watering system that uses harvested rainwater, I spend two hours a week on it, if that.

What advice would you give someone starting a roof garden? First, read Edward O Wilson's *The Diversity of Life* (Penguin, £12.99) to get you excited about what you're about to do, and get your roof terrace checked over by a structural engineer. The urban ecologist Dusty Gedge (dustygedge.co.uk) is excellent at advising on drainage and soil. ► bere.co.uk



'It's about more than bringing the countryside into the city; we need to look after nature if we want nature to look after us'





Top of the crops

Run by social enterprise Bootstrap, Dalston Roof Park sits on top of a community-owned east London building housing a gallery and creative workspaces. Last year, a bar was added and the space was opened to the public. Garden manager Sam Aldenton tells us more.

What do you grow? Fruit, vegetables and herbs – everything from pumpkins to carrots, raspberries and grapes. We also grow medicinal plants such as echinacea, which is used to treat the common cold. Last year's crop was divided between the people who work in the building.

Why is it good for the area? Dalston only has one-tenth of the national recommended amount of green open space. We wanted to address that, as well as demonstrating the role that the city can play in enriching eco systems. Plus, it's just a nice place to be!

Does it take a lot of time to look after? Last summer we had one main volunteer who worked on it almost full-time. Because the garden is on the roof and we use grow bags, the soil retains very little water, so we have to water everything twice a day. This year, we want to create more of an allotment feel with different people responsible for their own sections. So if one person grows potatoes, they can swap produce with a strawberry grower.

What advice would you give someone starting an urban garden? Don't underestimate the time it can take to look after large growing spaces. Also, it's nice to grow things in a group, so why not start your own gardening club and share the responsibilities?

bootstrapcompany.co.uk



PICTURES: ELLIOTT COLE

'Dalston only has one-tenth of the recommended amount of green space. We wanted to address that'

Green gastronomy

Phill Morgan is the manager of the charitable Acorn House restaurant in King's Cross, north London. As part of its organic, local food ethos, the restaurant has created its own vegetable garden on the roof of its premises.

What's the purpose of the garden?

We didn't want to waste the rooftop space, and it's a good way to link our chefs to the soil. They tend the garden, plant the seeds and then cook the vegetables. It's good training for them to see the food that's in season by looking out of the window.

What do you grow? Although we use British produce in our dishes, our culinary style is inspired by Tuscany, so we grow black cabbage (which is native to that region), asparagus, salad greens, herbs, courgettes, beans and tomatoes. We also have alpine strawberries, which thrive in a tiny garden and do well in winter because they can stand the cold. All our

food waste is composted and we also have a wormery, which means that all the waste goes back into the garden.

How much time do you spend looking after the garden? We do it ourselves for a couple of hours a week – a few of the chefs have got green fingers. In the summer, we all help to do the watering first thing in the morning.

What advice would you give to someone starting an urban garden?

Don't start off with small planters, because you'll only have to transfer everything. Go with big plant pots and line them well to keep out pests. acornhouserestaurant.com

'Our chefs tend the garden, plant the seeds and cook the vegetables. It's great training for them to see what's in season by looking out of the window'



Urban garden essentials

Cool kit, courses and more

SEED BOMBS

The guerrilla gardener's best friend, seed bombs are green grenades for neglected spaces. The SeedBom by Kabloom is made from recycled materials that break down to leave only flowers behind. Simply soak it and drop it. £9.95 (kabloom.co.uk).

GARDEN ADVICE AND DESIGN

Urban space specialist City Leaf offers at-home consultations on how to create edible gardens in small spaces (cityleaf.co.uk). Design outfit Incredible Gardens promises to transform your outdoor space into an 'exquisite garden you can eat or drink' – from goji berries to winter salads (incrediblegardens.co.uk).

WILDLIFE

Keeping chickens or bees can be as rewarding as growing plants. We love The Hen House Garden Company's colourful coops (hen-house.co.uk). Or check out the ultra-modern 'Nogg' – its glass and stainless-steel dome twists and lifts for ventilation and cleaning access. £1,950, Eco Age (eco-age.com). The Beehaus is a fabulously modern hive in bright yellow. Specially designed for a garden or rooftop, its triple insulation and sheltered landing area mean happy bees and honey galore. £515 with starter kit, Omlet (omlet.co.uk).

COURSES

Food growers with tiny spaces should visit Vertical Veg, a not-for-profit website that supports gardeners. Together with Food From The Sky, it runs courses from a supermarket roof in Crouch End, London (verticalveg.org.uk). Omlet (omlet.co.uk) lists nationwide courses on keeping everything from bees to pigs.

READING MATERIAL

Creating Your Garden Farm: How To Grow Fruit and Vegetables and Raise Chickens and Bees by Nicki Trench (CICO Books, £19.99) takes you through how to start your very own garden farm, step by step. **ED**