

A SECRET GARDEN IN THE SKY

Creating this rooftop oasis – seven storeys up with no lift – presented huge challenges but the effort paid off, with a stunning space high above the city

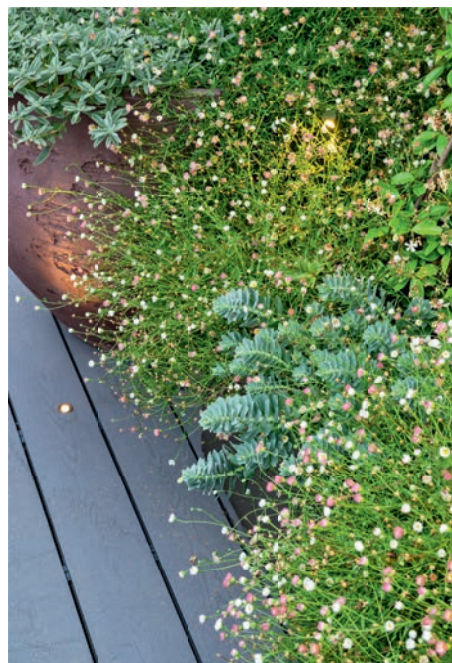
WORDS VANESSA BERRIDGE | PHOTOGRAPHY MARIANNE MAJERUS

The natural environment for *Juniperus virginiana* 'Hetzii' is rocky, windswept hills, which makes it an ideal option for this exposed roof terrace



French doors open onto the spacious terrace, which seems even larger thanks to the use of mirrors. One (above) is almost encircled by garlands of *Trachelospermum jasminoides*

YOUR EYE IS DRAWN AWAY FROM THE DROP AND TOWARDS THE WALL OF STAR JASMINE



Step through the French doors of Nathalie Brown's seventh-floor flat onto her rooftop garden and it's not just the spectacular views that take your breath away. 'Wow' moments vie for attention at every turn, from the inviting seating area that features two striking juniper trees to the contemporary dining space perfect for summer entertaining. The garden exudes relaxed elegance, yet creating this rooftop haven on a building with no lift, in a street too narrow for a crane, was anything but a relaxed experience.

THE PLANNING STAGE

Garden designer Maitanne Hunt is highly experienced at creating roof terraces, but admits this project was one of the most complex she has ever tackled. Firstly, there was the access issue. Secondly, when it came to the building work, a diplomatic approach was required when dealing with the managing agents and the residents of the 15 other apartments in this 1900s red-brick building in West Kensington, London. To keep everyone happy and informed, she sent an email every Friday to her client and to the agent, detailing the week's progress and plans for the following week. As Maitanne explains: 'Communication is vital on a project like this.'

To access the roof, Maitanne was permitted to raise scaffolding and an internal hoist from the back street. Once this was in place, degraded hardwood was removed and replaced with properly underpinned composite decking. The builders also restored the parapet walls, replaced missing lead coping and roof slates, and installed railings at the right height. Another major consideration was the terrace's awkward shape, created by a previous owner when uniting two flats and terraces. 'They were linked by a floating gangway,' recalls Maitanne, 'difficult for anyone with any fear of heights. I had to do something to take away that scary feeling.'

This she has done almost entirely with planting, covering the railings with evergreen star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*). Now, when walking from the seating area to the dining terrace, your eye is drawn away from the drop and towards the wall of star jasmine, which also provides a delicious scent all summer. →



Owner Nathalie reupholstered her existing furniture in new fabrics that harmonise with the colours of the roofscape. The mirror on this side is framed by *Nerium oleander*



'WHEN YOU STEP ONTO THE TERRACE, YOU'RE SURROUNDED BY A CLOUD OF SCENT'

The verdigris-topped tower across the rooftops is framed from the dining terrace by careful positioning of the planting, while the colour is picked up by the furniture

THE DESIGN DETAILS

For Maitanne, the roofscape reminded her of a scene from *Mary Poppins* and she has worked with that, incorporating the chimney pots within her design and reflecting their colour in the peach, coral and burgundy of the soft furnishings, planters and the planting. She anchored the scheme with two high flat-topped juniper trees (*Juniperus virginiana* 'Hetzii') – one with crossed trunks, both standing in 90cm pots above waist level. They dominate the sitting area and are magnificently architectural, offering a striking contrast between their large heads and the slim, textured pots. When you sit on the sofa between them, the trees are reflected back at you in a mirror opposite. This is one of two mirrors, framed by panels of leftover decking, mounted on chimney breasts and used to emphasise aspects of the planting and create more sense of space.

THE PLANTING

The choice of plants evokes both the American prairies – in homage to Nathalie's US-born husband – and the Mediterranean, which suits Nathalie, who grew up in southern France. It includes grasses mixed with drought-tolerant perennials such as sanguisorba, echinacea, salvias, euphorbia and verbascum, and fits surprisingly

well into the rooftop environment of chimney pots and brickwork. The dining terrace picks up the style and planting of the sitting area. As well as the star jasmine, pots of multi-stemmed *Osmanthus x burkwoodii* parasols echo the shape of the junipers and are similarly underplanted with erigeron and helianthemum. The osmanthus also frame French doors from the apartment so, as Nathalie says, 'when you step onto the terrace in summer, you're surrounded by a cloud of wonderful scent'.

THE ENTERTAINING AREA

In a pale green colour, the dining table and chairs echo the shades of the foliage as well as the verdigris-topped tower that can be seen across the rooftops, sitting squarely in the eyeline between the osmanthus. This helps to settle the terrace in its cityscape, yet the density of the planting in a variety of containers also makes the garden seem enclosed. At night, when the trunks of the trees and the various pots are uplit, the terraces seem even more magical and are the ideal setting for entertaining. As Nathalie says: 'I love the trees, pots and the lighting; they all work perfectly for our evening parties – I couldn't be happier with Maitanne's design.'

To see more of Maitanne's work, visit maitannehunt.com

MAÏTANNE'S TIPS FOR ROOFTOP GARDENING

- ✱ **Choose drought- and wind-tolerant plants.** Grasses are lovely, as they move in the wind.
- ✱ **Opt for evergreen trees;** deciduous leaves are hard to dispose of and can block drains.
- ✱ **Dwarf pines**, such as *Pinus mugo*, are a good choice for container-growing on roof terraces.
- ✱ **Avoid grey foliage** as it's not great against the similar British sky. Instead, use brighter green Mediterranean plants such as thyme and oleander. Euphorbia is one of my favourites.
- ✱ **Pots on a terrace** should have a square base so they don't wobble in the wind.
- ✱ **Keep the colour palette simple.** There's usually a busy backdrop to a roof terrace.
- ✱ **An irrigation system is vital.** If it's battery-operated, check it before going away.
- ✱ **Installing a roof terrace is a professional job.** You need a structural engineer to check the weight load and build a supporting frame: each square metre has to be able to support 250kg (given that two people could weigh more than 150kg). Other considerations include drainage and access.
- ✱ **Don't update an existing terrace** before checking that it has been authorised in the first place.

This picture Multi-stemmed *Osmanthus x burkwoodii* is underplanted with *Erigeron karvinskianus* and *Helianthemum* 'Wisley Pink'
Below *Euphorbia myrsinites*, *Echinacea purpurea* and *Geum* 'Mrs J Bradshaw'
Bottom A firebowl is ideal for cooler evenings

