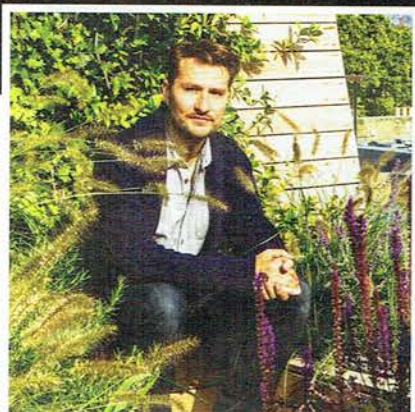


# DESIGNING ROOFTOPS



**GARDEN DESIGNER  
ADOLFO HARRISON  
TELLS US ABOUT THE  
UNIQUE SET OF ISSUES  
AND CONSIDERATIONS  
INVOLVED IN DESIGNING  
A ROOFTOP GARDEN**

**T**here's no point in pretending that a rooftop garden is a natural landscape – and that offers designers opportunities to push what gardens can be," says Adolfo Harrison, founder of Adolfo Harrison Gardens and cofounder of Cityscapes. Adolfo has over a decade's experience in the industry and has a multitude of projects under his belt, including rooftops, courtyards and public spaces.

When designing rooftops, Adolfo's brief is generally to bring the inside out and create a practical yet enjoyable space. "A lot of roof terraces are built into new builds, and they nearly always lead from the living area of the flat," he explains. "That means the exterior should aim to have an interior finish, and while with normal gardens you might have an interior element close to the living area before going on to create the view, with a rooftop the whole thing is that first section."

A rooftop garden is a harsh environment: open, exposed and often sterile. "To balance the openness and exposure we bring in layers, and, if possible, create a 'ceiling' of some kind – whether that's crown-lifted trees or an open pergola," Adolfo explains. "We try to create flow, so rather than one open space, we'll create

more than one space – that way, not only does it feel larger, but it's also a more dynamic and welcoming environment."

## Perfect plants

When selecting plants, people are concerned about the effects of the sun, but Adolfo suggests that the wind should be the biggest consideration. "You have to choose plants carefully – rooftops have desert-like conditions, and the plants only have so much soil space. We use a lightweight, enriched, free-draining soil and a cockle-shell mulch to keep the moisture in," he says. "A rooftop garden struggles to develop a well-balanced ecosystem, so pests can take hold and plants can soon outgrow the pots. It's crucial to have good gardeners maintaining these spaces."

Adolfo chooses plants that are used to windy conditions – not only are they hardier, they also counteract what can look like a very manmade landscape. "There are a lot of right angles and hard landscaping, and you need to counter that with plants that appear to enjoy being windswept. Allow space for them to grow naturally – they can grow quite gnarly and start to take over, and that's really effective in balancing the design."



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### Materials

For materials, Adolfo opts for those that age with character. "We often use Western red-cedar – it's an ideal lightweight material. We explain to the clients that they're getting a material that doesn't age perfectly, but it adds a character that tropical hardwood lacks."

Another factor is how the garden feels. "We work with materials such as timber, which aren't too cold or too hot when walking barefoot. It needs to be functional as well as attractive."

### Logistics

On smaller budgets where a tender isn't needed, Adolfo and his team recommend that clients bring in contractors from the beginning, so that logistics can be considered from the get-go. "When you bring contractors in early, they become part of the design team, and we love that – one of the best parts of the job is collaborating. Brainstorming with them helps us to create a seemingly simple space, where everything is aligning perfectly and it looks almost like it hasn't been designed – like it's always been there and always will be there."

### Challenges

A challenge when designing rooftops is access;

this is something that Adolfo keeps in mind when designing the space. "Access is the biggest issue, and that affects the price of a project, too," he tells us. "On top of that, there are times when it's necessary to bring in structural engineers, as well as having to submit planning applications."

"With new builds, the inherent material palette is often quite stark. We're trying to create a warm environment, but there could be a lot of glass, stainless steel, white K Rend and concrete pavours in place. We have to counter that 'new development' feel and make it feel like you're in a garden, which can be challenging."

### Highlights

Adolfo describes rooftop gardens as 'a fantasy environment' and enjoys working on them, because of the more architectural situation. "We really get to push the boundaries and show what we can do, adding lots of detail," he says. "There's a fine line between the living environments created for roof gardens and interior design architecture. Roof gardens can require a lot of timber and structural works with finely tuned details. It can be slow work to get spot on, but it's really enjoyable seeing it come to life."

### Trends

Adolfo has seen a lot of designs that push the boundaries of outdoor living. "We're seeing a lot of outdoor cooking – some of our rooftops have full kitchens," he says. "In our designs we tend to create long benches, incorporating plants, which allows us to shape the space without losing it. We also ensure that the incremental heights of all elements, such as benches, planters and tables, all relate to each other to introduce a pleasing rhythm and sense of cohesiveness that is calming on the eye."

"Interior designers are currently using a lot of houseplants to bring the outside in. As garden designers, we're adding an interior touch to roofs and balconies, while interior designers are doing the opposite, and that's what clients are really going for now."

- 1 A terrace built around a courtyard sits under a canopy of *Rhus typhina* 'Dissecta' in Highbury
- 2 Western red-cedar pergolas and screens being taken over by *Trachelospermum jasminoides*
- 3 Gnarly *Vitis vinifera* frames and shelters this exposed roof garden
- 4 Family dining areas can form the centrepiece of the garden, like a kitchen table would indoors
- 5 Plants to look through over views of Regents Park