

Head chef Robin Gill picks fresh salad leaves at The Dairy's rooftop kitchen garden



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URBAN OASIS

From fruit and veg to herbs and honey, city growers are taking roof gardens to tasty new heights

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For businesses in the UK's major cities trying to improve their eco-credentials, things are looking up – literally. With increased pressure on green space in urban areas, some innovative companies have turned their rooftops into flourishing kitchen gardens and biodiversity havens.

For head chef Alex Boyd, the edible roof garden at St Ermin's Hotel (sterminshotel.co.uk) in London is a huge source of inspiration for his seasonal menus. 'It's great to use fresh ingredients with zero food miles and it adds to the hotel's strong environmental ethos – we also have an anaerobic digester to compost any food scraps in a natural way,' explains Alex.

The hotel's own honey is harvested from six bee hives on the terrace above the sixth floor, the greenhouse has a hydroponic system so salad leaves can be grown all year round, and the pretty kitchen garden is tended to every day by the hotel gardener. In summer, edible flowers such as violas and nasturtium are in bloom, fruit trees include apple, plum and quince, and the vegetable patches are full of radishes, beetroot, berries and herbs. In the winter, cabbages, carrots, onions, garlic and potatoes are harvested. 'The tomatoes taste incredible,' says Alex. 'And it's a great way for people to feel connected to where their food comes from – garden visits are fun and educational for hotel

guests, and in the kitchen the daily harvest creates a lot of creative energy for the team which is lovely.'

St Ermin's is not alone. Roof kitchen gardens are starting to pop up all over, from The Dairy (the-dairy.co.uk) in Clapham, south London, where chef Robin Gill grows salad leaves and herbs on the roof, to Pier Eight at The Lowry (thelowry.com) in Salford Quays where head chef Oliver Thomas grows fresh produce on the roof to help reduce the restaurant's carbon footprint. Companies such as Standard Chartered Bank and Nomura Bank in the City, and the IKEA store in Greenwich have also transformed their roofs into sustainable growing spaces.

'I think it's interesting that many companies are using roofs to engage their staff in food growing,' says Dusty Gedge of Living Roofs (livingroofs.org), an independent organisation promoting green roofs and living walls in urban areas. 'Urban food growing on roofs can be very beneficial for the health and wellbeing of staff and citizens in such a dense urban environment like central London.'

Forty-two per cent of the UK's green roofs are in London, covering more than 1.5 million square metres, and some are used for food growing. In Piccadilly, Fortnum & Mason's green roof spans more than 200 square metres



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An idyllic kitchen garden flourishes above the sixth floor of St Ermin's Hotel

‘roof gardens maximise on the potential of a city’s green spaces while increasing biodiversity’



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The bees at St Ermin's can collect nectar from the rooftop plants, as well as local parks and gardens

(fortnumandmason.com). ‘This green habitat brings multiple benefits, including improved air quality, better energy efficiency for the building and increased biodiversity,’ says Sasha Notley, head of technical and sustainability at Fortnum & Mason. ‘For the past 10 years, hives of British Buckfast bees have foraged on the moss roof and locally in Green Park to produce our Piccadilly honey, and the opportunity to create a living roof was a natural next step so we have since introduced planters to grow herbs, fruit and vegetables which are used in our restaurants.’

Working with businesses and communities to create custom-built gardens, Urban Organic (urban-organic.co.uk) turns under-utilised roof spaces into food-producing gardens for chefs, caterers and restaurants. Their kitchen garden at Subsea 7, London, is award-winning. ‘We believe that cities should be centres of food production as well as consumption, and that roofs offer a unique opportunity for green development,’ says Urban Organic co-founder and director Jack Astbury. ‘We use organic methods and focus on growing high-yielding high-value crops. We grow unusual plant varieties such as Chilean guava, pepino melon, wasabi, samphire and Chinese artichoke, to name a few. We compost all our green waste on site, and use a combination of hot composting and wormeries to create fertility for our plants. As well as producing food, we also grow a wide variety of wildlife plants and many of our gardens support aviaries.’

Growing food in unusual places maximises on the potential of a city’s green spaces while increasing biodiversity – both crucial to climate-proofing urban areas. ‘It would be great

Herbs and flowers, such as mint and cornflower, are grown in recycled containers at Pier Eight



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if more developments incorporated green and edible roofs to give people scope to grow their own food and be more self-sufficient,’ says Sarah Williams, programme director for Sustain (sustainweb.org), the alliance for better food and farming. ‘As an organisation, this is something we’re encouraging councils to consider, as it’s not so easy to retrofit green spaces on roofs.’

Although existing buildings might not have been designed with rooftop gardens in mind, more new-builds are incorporating clever green spaces into their design. Landscape-led property developer Eden Retirement Living is integrating green space into the design of Pearl House, a collection of 60 apartments in Newbury, Berkshire. The top-floor penthouses will feature private rooftop gardens so residents can grow their own fruit, vegetables or flowers. Liam Kelly, managing partner at Eden, says: ‘We believe it takes more than bricks and mortar to make a home; we want our residents to be healthy, happy and connected to each other, to nature and the wider community.’



As well as hives, St Ermin's has a 'suite' of nesting areas to accommodate solitary bees



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There are other benefits too. 'Green roofs can act as insulators and help regulate heat, plus they slow down any water run-off,' explains Dr Nicola Rivers, living landscape development manager at Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust. 'In urban environments, they can be key to the green infrastructure linking other habitats that are on the ground level. If you look down from a rooftop, you can see there are so many grey flat roofs that are missed opportunities.'

Mark Patterson, urban ecologist, founder of Api:Cultural (apicultural.co.uk) and active member of the London Beekeepers' Association, has five rooftop apiaries in the capital. 'Quite often roofs are dead spaces that otherwise wouldn't be used for anything else, but you can grow veg, put bees there and create wildflower meadows.' Keeping bees

at altitude has its challenges – first off logistics – and some of Mark's bees are kept on concrete roofs on the 11th floor of office buildings. 'It's windy up on the rooftops, so it's essential to think about aspect and which direction the hives face – sometimes they need screening or a wind barrier. Early in the year when it's cold and the wind speeds are higher, bees won't fly so far, so it's worth planting herbs and spring bulbs so they can forage close by. Then by summertime, honeybees fly further afield – my bees fly up to 8 kilometres away to forage,' says Mark. 'Each hive needs about 8 hectares of green space to forage on, but in the heart of the city green spaces are limited. The art of beekeeping is all about picking the right spot – by not putting too many hives close together, bees won't compete for food.'

Honeybees contribute to the pollination of up to 30 per cent of crops and flowers and Mark explains that globally there are 81 million beehives – including 5,500 registered beehives in London – and honeybees are not in decline, but wild and solitary bees are. So keeping honeybees on rooftops doesn't really 'save the bees' – he says the best approach is to grow more pollinator-friendly plants on roofs.

As well as making rooftops more wildlife-friendly, some of Mark's corporate clients sponsor urban greening programmes. For instance, improving green spaces in Hackney housing estates, installing pollinator gardens into schools, and teaching young people with learning difficulties how to keep bees. He also works hard to engage staff working in the buildings, taking groups to visit the hives, put on a bee suit, and learn about the importance of gardening for wildlife and conserving our insect populations. 🐝

Grow your own urban jungle

If you can't grow food on your roof, try growing on your balcony. Alice Vincent is the author of *Rootbound: Rewilding a life* and she writes a column about urban gardening, 40 feet up, in *The Telegraph*.

'I've grown edibles on an exposed balcony that got a fair bit of light, and on a much more shaded woodland balcony that didn't,' she tells *Reclaim*. 'While wind is something to consider, as it really dries out soil in pots, I've actually found light and pests far more of a consideration when growing. Balconies aren't bothered by slugs too much, but pigeons will happily pick out germinating seeds and height is no barrier to aphids.'

'I like to grow edibles that if shop-bought are expensive to buy, drowning in plastic or lacking in taste. We don't have much room, so space-hungry varieties such as brassicas are out of the question. Instead, I recommend salad leaves for beginners as they are so easy, there are so many different varieties and they really can spice up any dish. Endive, rocket, mizuna, mustards – all germinate easily and work as cut-and-

come-again crops. I adore pea shoots, which just aren't worth buying – tough and rubbery and tasteless in the shops, but divine from the pot. Also herbs – fresh herbs are so much more delicious and can often overwinter in sheltered urban spaces far better than in a bed.'

🍷 *Rootbound: Rewilding a life* by Alice Vincent is published on 30 January (Canongate, £14.99); follow Alice on Instagram @noughticulture



© ALICE VINCENT

Subsea 7 has a kitchen garden, scented herb terrace, and ornamental and wildlife gardens

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Space-saving espalier apple trees are ideal for compact urban spaces, maximising yield

Coutts Skyline Garden above the Strand is a magical maze of corridors packed with planting



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Chefs have the pick of the crop at the Skyline Garden, from over 18,000 vegetables, fruit and herbs