

### IN BRIEF

**What** Small, city roof garden planted in containers.  
**Where** Bloomsbury, central London.  
**Size** Lower terrace is 5x4m, higher terrace is 4x3m.  
**Soil** Peat-free, multi-purpose compost with added seaweed liquid feed.  
**Climate** Temperate. Garden has a sunny aspect, sheltered by buildings and 1.5m high trellis.  
**Hardiness zone** USDA 9.



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The lower terrace of Charlie and Ben's roof garden is incredibly private thanks to high trellis fencing covered in *Trachelospermum jasminoides*. Generously planted containers picked up from salvage yards even include a 'Scrumptious' apple tree.

A marble-topped table, picked up at auction is used to display terracotta pots of succulents and doubles as a serving table.

Charlie's beloved dahlias pop up everywhere, including these 'Bishop of Auckland' (foreground) and 'Edinburgh'.

Florist Charlie McCormick (right) with his husband, interior designer Ben Pentreath.



## UP ON THE ROOF

*On the roof of their London town house, Ben Pentreath and Charlie McCormick have created an intimate roof garden using only container-grown plants*

WORDS ALEX MITCHELL PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM





UP THE VERTIGINOUS FIRE-ESCAPE LADDER, IT'S THE EDIBLES ZONE, LINED WITH SEVEN WOODEN PLANTERS

**Y**ou need strong legs to find the roof terrace of the florist Charlie McCormick and his husband, interior designer Ben Pentreath. Climb four flights of the handsome Bloomsbury town house – a brief pause to admire the ‘flower room’, blooms languishing in the butler’s sink – then it’s another set of stairs before a sun-drenched table comes into view.

It’s not easy keeping plants in pots alive at the best of times. But when you throw in that Charlie and Ben split their time between here and a parsonage in Dorset with its own acre of garden, in which Charlie grows dahlias and tulips for sale, it’s harder than most. “From August, we’re either in Dorset or away.” An automatic watering system seemed a good solution until it burst, prompting a note pushed through the trellis from their neighbours saying water had been gushing four metres into the air every night at 2am.

New Zealander Charlie grew up on a sheep farm, displaying cut flowers at the village shows. A stint working as ‘manny’ to Bridget Elworthy, half of the florists

The Land Gardeners, developed his eye for generous tapestries of colour. His images of the parsonage cutting beds attract what you might call a healthy Instagram following (73.2k and rising fast). He laughs, “I think there must be a lot of people out there into dahlias and tulips.”

The roof garden of this rented property has the multi-layered, spilling generosity that you’d expect from McCormick’s planting eye – “I like colour,” he smiles – but this ‘little brother’ garden to its Dorset relative has to be self-reliant to survive.

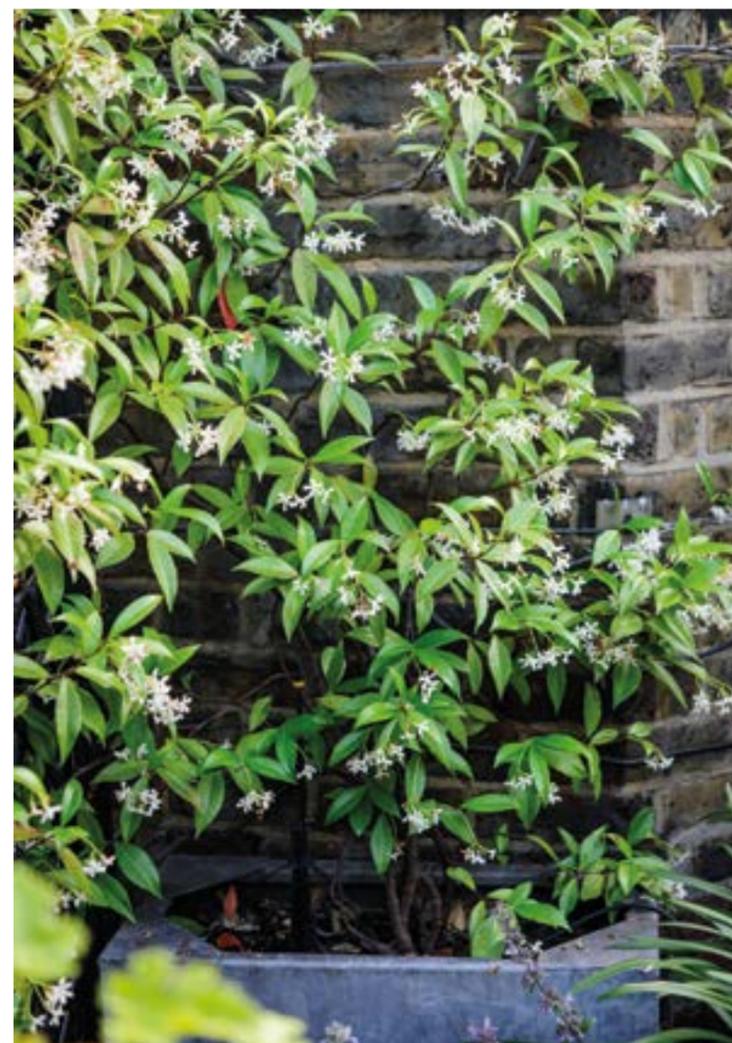
On the lower terrace, pots of neglect-happy sedums are displayed on a marble-topped sewing table the couple found at auction. Clustered around the small folding table and chairs, dolly tubs found at Sunbury Antiques Market at Kempton Park erupt with *Verbena bonariensis*, and terracotta pots brim with agapanthus, nepeta, lavender and scented pelargoniums, all thriving on infrequent watering. Foxgloves, too, have taken to rooftop life, happily self-seeding in their terracotta pots.

Reclaimed water tanks are large and deep enough to keep the roots of evergreen climber *Trachelospermum jasminoides*,

hart’s tongue and male ferns, a clematis Charlie can’t remember the name of and ‘Scrumptious’ apple tree on a MM106 rootstock from drying out. “They’re really good eaters. We get a better crop from it than from all the trees in the orchard in Dorset,” he says. He also takes the blossom into the house for arrangements. Another equally roomy tank by the door can cram in a fig tree, *Rosa* ‘Climbing Iceberg’, passionflower and *Cobaea scandens*.

Up the vertiginous fire-escape ladder, it’s the edibles zone, lined with seven large wooden planters made by Ben’s father. Even here, Charlie can’t resist cramming in colour, with sweet peas alongside the rosemary, rocket, beans and garlic, which all grow well, but the tomatoes rarely make it through the summer.

No matter. Plants that are looking good can always be brought up from Dorset in buckets to fill gaps – nicotiana, dahlias or cosmos. Meanwhile, dead leaves and the top few centimetres of old compost is bagged up and taken down to the parsonage compost heap. “I admit it’s a bit of a luxury,” smiles Charlie. “But it’s good to keep it in the system and not have it end up in landfill.” □



## THE SELF-RELIANT GARDEN

Like many small urban spaces, Charlie and Ben’s roof garden is planted entirely in pots and has to withstand long periods without watering. This is how they help the plants thrive:

**Use large containers** – particularly for trees and climbers – so the compost dries out slowly. Reclaimed water tanks around 60cm each way, and dolly tubs are deep enough to retain moisture for long periods. They are also slightly narrower at the top, which reduces evaporation.

**Choose drought-tolerant plants.** *Verbena bonariensis*, agapanthus, lavender, nepeta, sedums, pelargoniums, nasturtiums, foxgloves and nicotiana all cope well with the infrequent watering.

**Use a good peat-free, multi-purpose compost** – such as New Horizons – and, if you are going away, a ‘dollop’ of liquid seaweed feed to give the plants a pick-me-up on your return.

**Ensure you have decent water pressure,** especially if you are gardening on the roof of an old property. Charlie and Ben use a water tank topped up automatically from the mains, which is tucked under the steps to allow fast filling of watering cans.

**If growing edibles,** choose Mediterranean herbs (rosemary, oregano, thyme and sage), perpetual spinach, chillies, garlic and wild rocket that can cope with infrequent watering.

**Don’t be too wedded to anything.** Be prepared to replace casualties. Encourage plants that do thrive in the conditions by allowing them to seed in situ.

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**The sunny upper terrace** is crammed with terracotta pots and seven, rectangular, deep, black wooden planters made by Ben’s father. Charlie fills every available space with lettuce, rocket, mesclun leaves, garlic, potatoes, herbs and beans, but can’t resist adding tulips and dahlias as well as sweet peas growing up twiggy sticks and cane wigwams.

**A deep, reclaimed water tank** ensures the roots of *Trachelospermum jasminoides* stay cool and damp even when the couple are away for long periods.

**Decking and fencing has transformed** what was once a bare lead roof area into an intimate space for enjoying a morning coffee or early evening glass of wine among pots of agapanthus, foxgloves and *Verbena bonariensis*.

