

# Growing a garden on your roof is not mad – it's actually rather clever

By Eugene Higgins

**W**hen I was a child, I remember visiting a house that had a lawn on its roof. It seemed so mad that I decided the owners must be secret hippies.

Little did I know then that growing grass on the roof was not some barmy new-age claptrap. It actually cuts the costs of running a home and helps reduce your carbon footprint. And it has been done for millennia.

It increases the thermal efficiency of the house, reduces noise pollution, absorbs carbon emissions, provides a wildlife habitat and, of course, increases green space in city areas.

Two years ago, I tried to build a 'green roof' myself at the Carrigoran House nursing home in Co. Clare. Given the low demand for roof gardens at the time, it was hard to get the right parts and plants to build it correctly. Plus, I was rushing in, not really knowing what to do. It was never finished properly and still irks me that we did not get it right.

Thankfully, the whole process is far easier nowadays and indeed, is undergoing a revival, with Rita Higgins (no relation) and Paul Quirke of Anú Green designing green roofs especially tailored to Irish conditions and tastes.

I joined Rita and Paul this week as they installed a green roof in Dublin, to see how their new design was coming on.

Rita explained how she came to have an interest in this style. 'I went to university at McGill in Montreal and started realising how little green space one came across on a daily basis. Parts of McGill are situated high up on a hill where you have good views across the city and I just remember thinking how much wasted space there was on the rooftops – and wouldn't it be fantastic to make use of them by turning them into green space.'

'I remember being on the roof of my brother's Brooklyn apartment, staring across at Manhattan and thinking it was the best part of the whole apartment. It was just a matter of making it a useable space,' she said.

'From those two experiences, I began researching roof-top gardens and green spaces. I came across Green Roofs For Healthy Cities, a non-profit organisation that highlighted the numerous benefits and types of green roofs. I began attending conferences and training programmes and here I am today.'

Boosted by Paul's engineering and landscaping background, the pair have combined their talents to follow their dream and turn Ireland's roofs into living things.

And not before time too, as green roofs are very popular in other countries. Norway has been using them for more than 100 years and they are being built in Tokyo, Japan, to combat pollution and to help cool down the massive city.

The Japanese are so enamoured of the idea that, in

2001, they made a law ordering all buildings with a footprint over 1,000sq.m to have 20pc covered with vegetation by 2011.

The US is also well ahead of us. The biggest roof garden in the world is in Chicago's millennium park, with a one-million-square-foot (325,000sq.m) green space over a car park.

Seeing how much work needed to be done to make roof gardens more popular in this country, Rita and Paul formed Anú Green in Cork

**FIDDLERS ON THE ROOF:** Paul, left, Eugene and Rita

more than a year ago. So far, they have made good progress in the firm's home city. They have already built a 160sq.m green roof in Cork Mall, over the Bank of Ireland.

The roofs are built in a self-contained unit made of oak, with a drip water system built by Paul.

'I use hardy succulents, like sedums, which make up about 60pc, and then add armeria, dianthus, thyme and arenaria,' Rita said.

'These are all small, low-growing plants that work well in Ireland. By planting these you get a combination of colour and green that gives a good year-round effect with 80pc coverage in year one and 100pc coverage in year two.'

So if you like the idea of having a very trendy green roof, what's involved?

You need to water every two weeks, if the weather is warm, and the weeding is twice yearly, with an application of slow-release fertiliser.

I felt I was learning a lot about the process as Rita's roof neared completion. The planting medium they used was 50pc crushed clay, 30pc

sand and 20pc bark compost. Needless to say, this was not the type of mix I had used on my failed green roof attempt two years ago.

'We are promoting alternative types of roof.'

'So far in Ireland, our roofs have been planted using either 9cm plants or plug plants,' Rita said.

**T**he benefits of our planted roof are that the selection we use are more aesthetically pleasing. You can choose the plant combinations. Ordinary blankets of plants tend to only have six to eight types of sedum.

'Ours also increase the type of habitats you are creating for wildlife – and they are planted to suit the aspect and exposure.'

Before I left them I checked the cost of turning the top of a house into a garden.

'You need to budget about €155 per square metre,' Rita said.

As the green roofs finally begin to populate Ireland, Rita and Paul are also adding vertical gardens to their design portfolio. The method is similar to the one used on green roofs, except that concrete walls provide the base for a climbing garden. If I decide to build one of these, I'll ask Paul and Rita's advice before I do.

For more information, visit [www.eugenehiggins.ie](http://www.eugenehiggins.ie) or email [Eugene@colourgreen.ie](mailto:Eugene@colourgreen.ie)

**RISING STAR:** Gardens like this, built by Paul and Rita, are becoming popular in corporate Ireland

## Take your plot to new heights

### Don't forget... things to do this week

● Gardeners will be noticing a frothy substance on their plant stems at this time of year. This is called cuckoo spit and comes from a sap-sucking insect that creates the spit effect to protect itself. It does no serious damage, so no need for a pesticide.

● A common complaint is leek rust, or orange spots on leeks. All affected plants should be pulled up and destroyed. Rust can also affect onions.

● Now that it is July, the early flowering shrubs such as deutzia or weigela can be pruned by about one third. If they're newly planted then leave them be.

● If you have cyclamens left over from the winter and they're in pots, then report them leaving the bulb only half covered. Place them somewhere bright, but out of the midday sun, and allow the compost to be slightly moist.

● Red-hot pokers or kniphofias will be in flower soon and should already be in the garden centres. They have magnificent bright red flowers. If you are planting this summer, pick a dry sunny place for them.



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**VIVID:** Lacquer storage units

## Fancy that suite? Make a bid for it

By Muriel Bolger

Everyone is looking for bargains these days and the unthinkable is happening, as stores like Harvey Norman invite customers to make a bid for their desired objects.

So if you've had your eye on a suite, be brave and try this tactic in other stores. They all need to shift stock to make space for the autumn ranges they've already ordered.

Already, Marks & Spencer has up to 30pc off on furniture and homeware and Arnotts has great 'specials' in beds and leather suites.

If, however, pennies don't matter, check Roche Bobois in Dublin's Beacon South Quarter, which is renowned for its great

sales. You can expect to have 15pc taken off all new orders and up to 50pc off floor models.

Look out for the Murano dining table with legs of hand-blown red glass and a clear top, which are reduced by half to €5,000. Also check out the lacquer storage units, which have dropped from €3,045 to €1,600 each.

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