



Up on the Roof

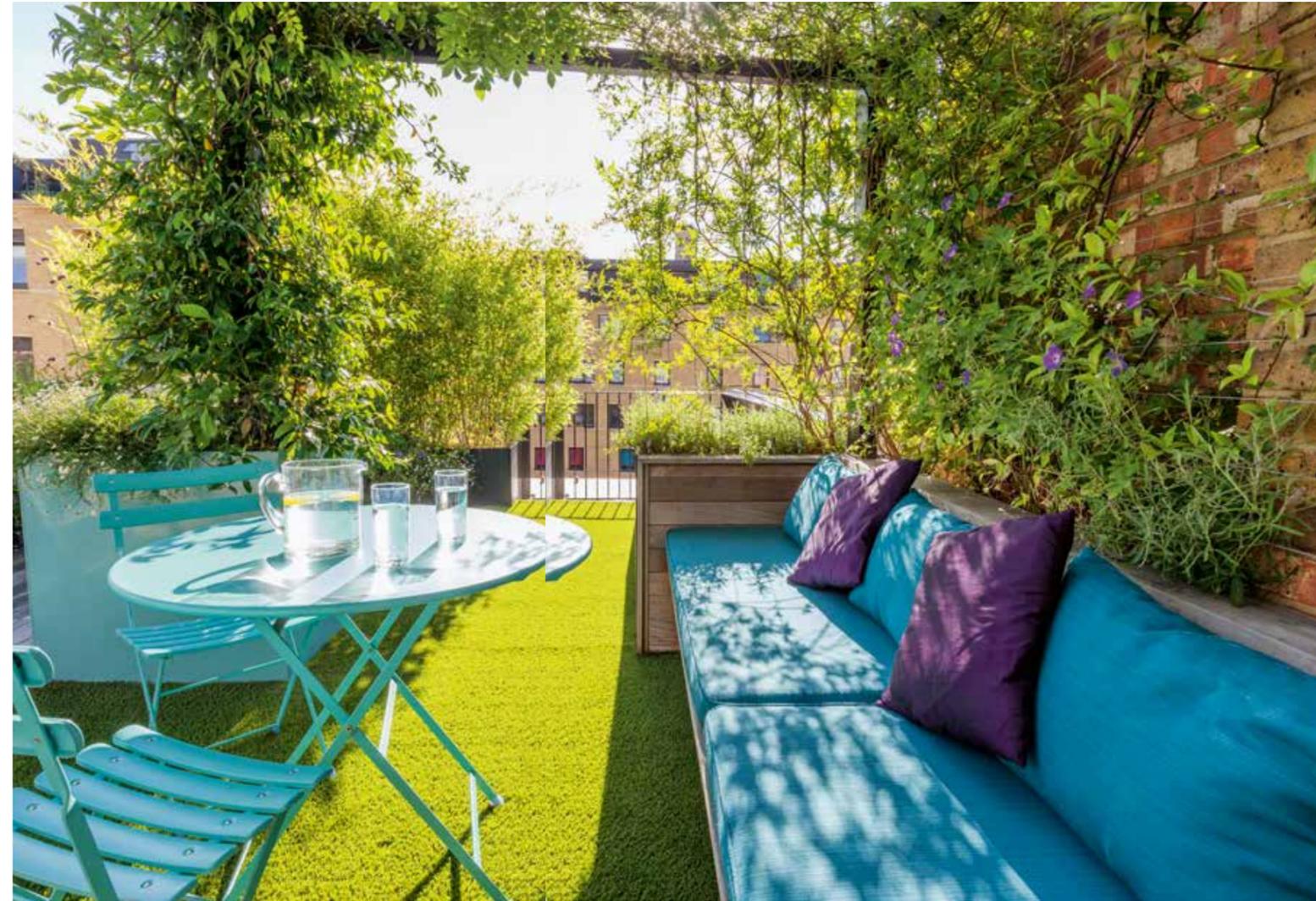
Suitable planting and neat design make a roof terrace where the owners can relax and entertain

WORDS **VERONICA PEERLESS**
PHOTOGRAPHS **RICHARD BLOOM**

When John Collier and his wife, Theresa, moved from leafy Richmond in southwest London to a town house in central Pimlico, everything was more compact – including the tiny garden at the back of the house. The couple was used to having outside space, and fortunately they had spotted an opportunity to create more. A staircase at the top of the house lead to a flat, asphalt-covered roof: “It was derelict and unpleasant, but it did have great views of the Thames and Battersea Power Station,” says John.

John and Theresa asked garden designer Sara Jane Rothwell to have a look at the 7m x 5m space, with a view to turning it into a roof garden, and immediately liked her ideas. As with most roof terraces, it came with a set of challenges – not least creating privacy from blocks of flats on two sides, while keeping the impressive views towards the river. The provision of some shade was also essential: “It was too bright up there during the summer months to be useable,” says John. Safety was an issue, too – the couple’s three grandchildren live next door, and would be regular visitors.

Sara Jane came up with the idea of a bower in the corner, which would screen the blocks of flats on

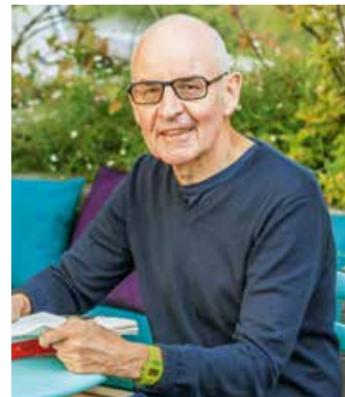


two sides but still give beautiful views to the south. She looked into the idea of a retractable blind to provide shade, but decided to go for tension wires that climbers could scramble over, providing shade.

Sara Jane sent her plans to a structural engineer for approval – something she does for all roof terraces. The roof was already watertight thanks to work done by the previous owners, but the large planter in the centre needed to support one of the pergola posts, was deemed too heavy. Half of it is now filled with polystyrene and lightweight hydroleca clay pebbles.

Sara Jane wanted to make the space feel like a garden, not a roof terrace. “You can’t get away from all the hard landscaping that surrounds a roof terrace, so I try to make the planting as soft as possible, like an English garden,” she explains. She used a limited colour palette of blues, purples and magenta, with robust plants that could cope with the exposed conditions, such as lavenders, *Penstemon*, hardy geraniums and grasses, as well as evergreens such as bamboo and climbers. To cover the entire area with decking would have been a little unforgiving and not very garden-like, so Sara Jane suggested an artificial lawn, which John describes as one of the great successes in the garden.

The garden was built during the winter of 2013. “The landscapers were working in every possible weather – snow, hail, rain, scorching sun,” says



Above left Scented jasmine (*Jasminum officinalis*) winds its way across the bower on steel tension wires.

Above Colourful penstemons are robust enough for the roof garden’s exposed conditions.

Below right Planters of bamboo are ideal for screening the garden from neighbouring flats.

Below John Collier makes the most of the new roof terrace.



Sara Jane. “They were great,” says John. “They brought everything up on a pulley; nothing had to come through the house.” John describes the garden as being of low maintenance – not that he minds pottering about in it, but as he is retired, a garden that demands little attention means that he can frequently be away from home. “I wanted something we could leave for two or three weeks without any maintenance while we were away.”

“We probably use the garden more for relaxing than entertaining, but when we have visitors from overseas or outside of London, they are intrigued by the view,” says John. “It is glorious up there.”

Sara Jane is satisfied with how the garden on the roof has turned out, too. “I’m really pleased with how the climbers have enclosed the pergola. For a tiny space, it looks larger than it did before. I am always trying to convince clients that a large lawn doesn’t necessarily make space look bigger – it is adding other elements that gives a garden scale.”

Above Storage is incorporated into the comfortable bench that runs around two sides of the bower.

Right Contemporary planters hold plants that are typical of English gardens, including lavender and geraniums.

FACT FILE

- **Garden design** by Sara Jane Rothwell. Tel: 079761 55282; londongardendesigner.com
- **Garden** built and materials supplied by Belderbos. Tel: 020 8940 2832; belderbos.co.uk
- **Planter** from Euro Planters (powder coated in turquoise). Tel: 01614 260207; europlanters.com
- **Table and chairs** bistro set from Emu. Tel: 020 7692 4001; madeindesign.co.uk
- **Outdoor fabric** from Sunbrella; sunbrella.com
- **Artificial grass** from the Easi-Mayfair range, supplied by Easigrass. Tel: 020 8843 4180; easigrass.com



Design Details

Pergola

The bower is a hardwood pergola, painted black, fixed to the brick wall and chimney breast. The legs disappear into a planter at the back and a large steel planter in the middle of the space. Steel tension wires cover the top, and two sides and are covered with climbers. As well as providing shade, the bower gives privacy from blocks of flats on two sides and makes the most of the views to the south of the building.

Seating area

The seating area was built by the landscapers to Sara Jane's design and is made from balau, a hardwood. On one side, the seating is hinged so that items can be stored within it. It is not completely watertight, but is useful for storage in summer. The seats have a 40cm depth so that they are comfortable. The seating pads are bespoke and have been made using weather-resistant fabric. Theresa made the matching scatter cushions.

Artificial lawn

"We were going to use hardwood decking throughout, but we decided that the artificial lawn would soften and break up the space," says Sara Jane. "It was also more economical." She chose the Easi-Mayfair range from Easigrass. "It has the thickest weave, and even has some 'dead thatch' to make it look realistic." John vacuums it with an old vacuum cleaner.



Above Cushions, bistro set and powder-coated planters all match in vivid turquoise.

Right Cascading *Erigeron karvinskianus* softens the straight lines of modern planters.

Below Balau timber was used to make the bower's wide bench.



Decking, trellis and raised beds

The decking, trellis and raised beds were also built by the landscapers, from balau wood. "I usually use balau, ipe or iroko hardwoods, always FSC certified," says Sara Jane.

Planting

The bower is covered with *Clematis montana*, *Wisteria sinensis*, *Trachelospermum jasminoides* and jasmine. Planting in raised beds and planters includes tough, reliable plants such as *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote', *Geranium himalayense* 'Gravetye', *Salvia officinalis*, *Penstemon* 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn' (previously 'Garnet'), *Erigeron karvinskianus*, and *Stipa tenuissima*. A silver birch (*Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*) in a triangular planter provides height and additional privacy. Additional screening is provided by a bamboo, *Phyllostachys bissetii*.

Irrigation system

Sara Jane says that an irrigation system on a roof terrace is essential – plant in pots dry out quickly, especially in exposed conditions. The irrigation system was installed by the contractors and delivers water twice a day in summer. ■