



The Rooftop Growing Guide: How to Transform Your Roof into a Vegetable Garden or Farm

By Annie Novak

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If you'd like to grow your own food but don't think you have the space, look up! In urban and suburban areas across the country, farms and gardens are growing atop the rooftops of residential and commercial buildings.

In this accessible guide, author Annie Novak's passion shines as she draws on her experience as a pioneering sky-high farmer to teach best practices for raising vegetables, herbs, flowers, and trees. The book also includes interviews, expert essays, and farm and garden profiles from across the country, so you'll find advice that works no matter where you live. Featuring the brass tacks on green roofs, container gardening, hydroponics, greenhouse growing, crop planning, pest management, harvesting tips, and more, *The Rooftop Growing Guide* will have you reimagining the possibilities of your own skyline.

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Editorial Review

Review

As seen in the *New York Times*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Modern Farmer*, *Edible Brooklyn*, *Organic Life*, *City Lab-Atlantic Magazine*, and *Design*Sponge*

“Novak’s prose is clear, warm and accessible. No space is wasted in her garden, and it’s the same in her book, where every page is packed with information...Her book is also a terrific introduction to farming in Any Yard, U.S.A.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“With *The Rooftop Growing Guide*, Annie Novak has given us a blueprint to reimagine thousands of underutilized acres in urban environments. In a book that reflects her own creativity, intellectual curiosity, and experience, she provides both inspiration and detailed, practical guidance to create farms in the sky.”

— Will Allen, MacArthur fellow and author of *The Good Food Revolution*

“Annie Novak explores every imaginable detail of how to turn any community’s acres of unused rooftops into deliciously productive gardens. This book has already become an invaluable resource to our restaurant crew as we search for new ways to expand our rooftop production.”

— Rick Bayless, chef/owner of **Frontera Grill**, Topolobampo, and XOCO Chicago

“*The Rooftop Growing Guide* is filled with essential information about how to grow food on the alien plains of building tops. What makes it so much more than a how-to guide are the gorgeous photographs proving it can all be done, and the prose passages that make clear the wisdom and joyousness with which Novak embraces her work.”

— Joan Gussow, professor and author of *This Organic Life*

About the Author

Annie Novak is the head farmer and cofounder of the nation’s first commercial green roof vegetable farm, the Eagle Street Rooftop Farm atop Broadway Stages in Brooklyn. She is the manager of the Edible Academy at the New York Botanical Garden, and founder and director of Growing Chefs, a field-to-fork food education program. She lives in New York City.

The Rooftop Growing Guide was photographed by Naima Green and Jackie Snow (unless otherwise noted) with Lucas Foglia; illustrations by Annie Novak and Lauren Heanes.

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Introduction

I’ll be honest with you: when I was asked to cofound the first commercial green roof farm in the country, I thought the idea was completely nuts. For-profit vegetable farming is a challenge in its own right, let alone several stories up in the air. On my first visit to the future site of Eagle Street Rooftop Farm in Brooklyn, New York, I climbed the stairs with a strong sense of trepidation. On the empty, open roof, the wind seemed too windy. The sun beat down on the silver tar roof surface a full twenty degrees hotter than at street level. Standing on the empty rooftop, I didn’t hear the buzz of a single bee, honey or bumble. I was familiar with green roofs, but primarily as passive spaces planted with drought-tolerant plants like sedum. I was worried

that green roof growing medium—whatever that was—would be too nutrient poor and drain too quickly for growing healthy vegetables. Moreover, I love insects and microbes, and I imagined it would be challenging to grow plants in an isolated ecosystem several building stories up above ground-level worms and mycorrhizal fungi. Besides, there is plenty of soil on the ground, even in urban landscapes. Why would we put ourselves through the agony of dragging it up the stairs?

But looking around at the greater landscape of North Brooklyn gave me pause. I was surprised to see that our neighbor had a small but well-established container garden on his rooftop. Looking west toward the sweeping view of the Manhattan skyline, a twenty-plus-story apartment building had unmistakably flourishing trees on its upper terraces. I paced the empty rooftop with a growing sense of excitement. Behind me, the sun was climbing up over eastern Brooklyn and gently pushing away the morning chill. Below, a solid patchwork of flat and open warehouse roofs glittered in the sunshine, a *carte blanche* offering for our purpose. I felt my doubts fading, replaced by high-octane optimism.

It was going to be a challenge, but I was intrigued. I'm a die-hard "yes!" person, and this rooftop farming scheme combined everything I loved: food, plants, and people. There was a dash of politics and the opportunity to improve city policy thrown in for good measure. I started to read a book a day about urban gardening, gleaning what I could about rooftops by moving between historical accounts of urban gardening to new publications about the possibilities of vertical agriculture. New York City has a long-standing history of rooftop gardening, beginning at the turn of the twentieth century when rooftop outdoor theaters lavishly landscaped with flowers, vines, and trees provided cool green spaces as a respite to hot summer nights in the growing city. rooftops weren't just for the rich, either: Jacob A. Riis, one of the more famous muckrakers of the twentieth century, described a fictional tenement whose residents establish a grape arbor atop their local gymnasium. (The fiction account is a well-polished version of a true rooftop trend. A photograph Riis took around the same time shows a rooftop playground near Coney Island crowded with residents happily enjoying the cool breezes off the Atlantic Ocean.) As the twentieth century marched on, residential buildings throughout Manhattan continued to install rooftop gardens. Architecture, horticulture, policy, and the technology behind rooftop gardening changed, but the desire for green spaces remained. From the vantage of my bicycle, I took note of the cheerful wave of healthy tree boughs planted high above Manhattan's streets. In the fall of 2008, we met with Chris Goode, Lisa Goode, and Amy Trachtman of Goode Green, the design-build green roof company in charge of the project. Chris and Lisa Goode had already had success experimenting with rooftop vegetables. Their six-story building in Little Italy, New York City, featured a green roof and container garden that included a lawn, vegetables, espaliered fruit trees, and even chickens. My cofounder, Ben Flanner, was new to farming but had a clear vision for the venture supported by a business background. I grounded the project with an obsessive passion for plants as well as years of farming and farm market experience. Critically, we had the full support of a forward-thinking building owner, Broadway Stages, a television and movie production company based out of North Brooklyn. Brother and sister business partners, Tony and Gina Argento, had agreed to fully finance the installation of the green roof atop one of their soundstage complexes in the historic neighborhood of Greenpoint. It was the Argento's enthusiasm for the project and unbelievable generosity that gave the green roof traction, turning a pipe dream of a farm into a rooftop reality. The sound stage they proposed for the purpose was a historic warehouse building, built with the strength of solid craftsmanship in brick and steel, with flat, well-drained, structurally sound rooftops.

We were all excited to have the chance to grow hyper-local fresh vegetables, with food miles measured in flights of stairs. Additionally, the rooftop farm, as a green roof, presented an opportunity to address some of New York City's principal environmental issues. The growing media could capture storm water, preventing overflow on our century old, overtaxed municipal sewage system. The media and plant material would mitigate heat island effect, when urban areas become warmer due to human activities. I was excited about growing people as well as plants. Volunteering and apprenticeships were a strong and valuable part of my farm training, and an important component of urban farming. As public interest in local food rose, as a food purveyor and producer I'd started to feel the positive

impact that educated consumers could have on shifting the food chain towards healthier food, better farming practices, fairer pricing, and enriching the local economy. A green roof landscape also created the opportunity to stitch together the archipelago of green spaces necessary for those less well known New Yorkers, our pollinators and migratory birds.

By April 2009—after a couple of intense, unusually hot early mornings hoisting the green roof materials up to the rooftop by crane and raking the growing medium into place—we had the country’s first for-profit green roof-based rooftop row farm up and running. Eager to experiment, we grew over thirty varieties of crops to see which performed best in the shallow six-inch depth of the green roof growing medium. We meticulously tracked sales as we sold to chefs and at our own onsite market. I diligently recorded the weather, as in June and July a nearly sixty-day streak of uninterrupted rain sluiced down the drainpipes off the rooftops around us, compared to the moderate and slowly released flow percolating through the green roof system Goode Green had installed. We carried two apiaries for honeybees up the stairs and carried hundreds of pounds of produce down the stairs. Volunteers trooped up in increasing numbers, asking how. The media followed hot on their heels, asking why.

By the spring of 2010, our lives had changed as much as the roof. We branched out into other projects. Due to the international press attention the Eagle Street Rooftop Farm received, Goode Green was inundated with requests to design and install green roof gardens. Eager to focus on testing the profitability of green roof row farming, Ben Flanner went on to cofound the Brooklyn Grange Farm: over two acres’ worth of rooftop split between two sites in Queens and Brooklyn. Furthering their commitment to modeling green business practices, Broadway Stages installed a breathtaking fifty-thousand-square-foot solar array on top of seven of their twenty-eight sound stages. For the Eagle Street Rooftop Farm, they ask no rent for the rooftop’s use and generously finance the farm’s limited but crucial seasonal irrigation. Thanks to these tremendous boons, the Eagle Street Rooftop Farm thrives as a community nexus, offering educational programming for local schools alongside the for-profit sales that fund the farm’s operating costs.

At the time, I remember thinking the biggest shift in my life that year was simply that everything I felt passionate about—people, plants, food politics—was now growing strong three stories higher up than it had been the season before. With the benefit of hindsight and many more years of experience, I can say that the difference is richer than that. The ripple effect from our rooftop farm led to a national sea change that reimagined the possibilities of the urban landscape. Rooftop farming not only no longer seemed impossible; now it seemed inevitable. It is an incredible feeling to see what you love quicken in the hearts of others. I continue to try and share that sense of enthusiasm, empowerment, and possibility with everyone who visits the Eagle Street Rooftop Farm as well as the other green spaces I tend within New York City.

If you are reading this book, you have probably stood on your rooftop—or some rooftop—and heard the clarion call of that same elated omnipotence. There is something of the sailor’s spirit in the view from a building’s roof. The wind is in your hair, the eye-level tree canopy ripples like waves, and the blank slate of your newfound growing space is a freshly discovered island, full of thrilling possibilities.

It’s good to have that kind of energy, because you have hard work ahead of you. You will find yourself climbing multiple flights of stairs, or riding up in an elevator in which you are the only person carrying a bag of potting mix, your flats of lettuce next to someone else’s briefcase. There will be times when the sun dries out your crops or the wind topples your trellises, or you find that pigeons have picked away half your plantings. Sometimes the bureaucratic red tape around rooftops may seem worse than the stairs. But it’s worth it. It is undeniably pleasurable, healthy, and (sunburn, sweat, and frustrations aside) rewarding to turn what was once *not* alive, thriving, and green into something that *is*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

David Crockett:

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Linda Cunningham:

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Dwayne Moseley:

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