

In the garden upstairs

With her delightful South Kensington balcony, Penelope Bennett enjoys many features you might expect to find in larger and less elevated sites

Author: **Phil Clayton**, Features Editor, *The Garden*. Photography: **Neil Hepworth**

Penelope Bennett's balcony is an altogether more satisfying affair than those sported by the neighbouring houses, whose immaculate, white-painted balustrades with sterile, manicured balls and pyramids of potted *Buxus* may suit their impressive classical South Kensington façades, but do little to lift the soul.

Writer and potter Penelope has gardened her tiny west-facing space, just 5 x 2.5m (16½ x 8ft) and two floors up, at the back of her home since the late 1960s. 'Originally everything was supposed to be scented. After that it had to be edible,' she says.

For scent and flavour

Climbing *Trachelospermum jasminoides* is one of several hangers-on from the days of perfumed plants. It earns its keep with fragrant, propeller-shaped summer flowers and glossy, largely evergreen foliage. 'It has two autumns,' Penelope says, pointing to a solitary scarlet leaf, 'one at the normal time, one in spring.' Here also thrive (and all in pots) scrambling honeysuckle, jasmine and *Pittosporum tobira*, providing a permanent, seasonally fragrant structure.

Edible plants abound. By the wall grow figs, plums and pears on dwarf rootstocks. Herbs such as rosemary and sorrel flourish in their pots, while strawberries here and there dangle succulent fruit. In plastic sacks (used to reduce the load on the roof of the bathroom below), tall Jerusalem artichokes jostle with lower potatoes. 'I love growing potatoes,' she says, 'and have grown 32 different types.'

In summer, at the sunniest end of the balcony, are tomatoes – she likes 'Gardener's Delight' best – and aubergines, grown from seed obtained in Greece. By the door, Penelope grows various salad leaves, sown

in saucers of compost and grown on open shelves, maximising use of space. 'Sometimes I place a saucer of rocket, plus scissors, on the dining table for friends to snip their own, but people can be rather timid about snipping.'

One of the most rewarding spices she has grown is saffron (dried stamens of *Crocus sativus*). 'It is not difficult to flower, and the blooms have a delicious scent. You get enough saffron from a pot of bulbs to flavour a couple of dishes.'

Penelope has a wonderful aptitude for finding beauty in the seemingly mundane. Wild plants (not 'weeds') are included; pots of nettles to encourage butterflies, others for their simple beauty, such as caper spurge (*Euphorbia lathyris*). Even snails are not despised and for years she fed birds: 'I'd get goldfinches, robins, even a woodpecker; but then mice joined the bird clientele and the bird café had to be closed.'

Amid the plants there is space for a table and chairs, a chiminea for sitting out on cool evenings, and a tiny duckweed-covered pool with fountain. She even makes her own compost, in the house, using an odourless bokashi composter.

With all this going on in her little 'garden', has Penelope ever hankered for a larger plot? 'Not really,' she says. 'I love observing things. That's why a small garden is so lovely – you can take time to notice everything going on around you. The smaller the better.' ●

FURTHER READING

Window-box Allotment, by Penelope Bennett, Frances Lincoln, May 2012, £16.99 ISBN 9780711231733.

❖ See also Comment, May, p27.

Garden summary

London rooftop garden where edibles and ornamentals make the most of limited space.

Location: South Kensington, west London.

Size: 5 x 2.5m (16½ x 8ft).

Aspect: west-facing.

Age of garden: more than 40 years.

Visiting: private garden, not open to visitors.



West-facing wall

The balcony faces west, which helps provide a benign microclimate, receiving afternoon sun but cool shade in the mornings. It can suffer from westerly winds, however, so Penelope firmly secures larger plants.



Penelope's roof garden maximises planting potential through the year.



Pot-grown plums fruit regularly here.

Summer perfume

Sweetly scented plants such as *Trachelospermum jasminoides* (star jasmine) are important to a gardener working with such a small space.

Bit of everything

An evergreen *Pittosporum tobira* with scented cream blooms revels in the mild site. Penelope also grows an assortment of crops along the railing.



Penelope Bennett.



Looking down onto the tiny balcony.