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

Wittert 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 *Pittosporum tobira* is one of several hangovers-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 singular 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 – the likes of '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 strip 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.'

Penelope also grows *Trachelospermum jasminoides* (star jasmine) – important to a gardener working with such a small space.

**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.

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