

# Gardening in the Sky

Every home may not have a yard,  
but every house has a roof

**W**HEN SHE was just a little city girl visiting the farm her mother's family homesteaded in southern Illinois, Diana Arsham walked into a pink peony bush, and it sparked a love of gardening that has lasted all her life.

"I can still smell it," she says. "I bonded with that plant."

At college, her dorm room was filled with plants. After she graduated and married, many of those plants came on the three-week trip that brought her and her husband to San Francisco in 1972. Like coals to Newcastle, she even brought an avocado tree, which had to be cleared by the agricultural authorities when they entered the state.

"Well, I started it, and I grew attached to it," she says. "I still have a peanut cactus I brought. It must be 60 years old by now."

Urban gardening required extra effort. At their first apartment on Green Street, she climbed out the window to water the plants she grew on top of the garage. And then when they moved up the hill to their current home, at first she climbed up a ladder onto the flat roof.

"Look at the view," she says, spreading her arms out over the blue waters of the bay, with Angel Island in the distance.

"Look at the sunshine. I thought, 'How can we not have a garden?' So I've been up here nearly every day for 25 years."

At first she walked carefully on the tar and gravel roof and established a beachhead with a lawn chair looking out at the bay. Eager to grow her own food, she planted pole beans under trellises and other vegetables in wooden wine crates.

"They call it a bird's-eye view for a reason," she laughs. "They loved it. I gave them a buffet."

So she decided to stick to plants and flowers and kept climbing up with more wine crates.

**"L**UCKILY, we needed a new roof," she says. That provided the opening to build a stairway and develop the full potential of her rooftop garden. A structural engineer reported that the perimeter walls could bear the weight of a garden. The center was shored up with redwood rafters.

The wine boxes she'd been using were too shallow. An ad in the Sebastopol newspaper offered 55-gallon plastic barrels that once contained apple juice, which she cut into thirds and drilled with drain holes.

"They're ideal," she says. "They're lightweight, and plants don't really need more than a couple of feet of soil."

By the mid-80s, Arsham had become a true Californian, making annual pilgrimages to the Tassajara Zen Center,

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*"You look out over the rooftops of San Francisco and you see parking lots. I see potential gardens."*

DIANA ARSHAM, working in her rooftop garden

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where she volunteered in the gardens and the kitchen. She became a docent at the Strybing Arboretum, now the San Francisco Botanical Garden. She developed a missionary's zeal for sustainability and urban gardening.

"You look out over the rooftops in San Francisco, like most cities, and you see parking lots," she says. "I see potential gardens."

**S**O SHE volunteered with San Francisco Beautiful and chaired a task force that developed and published a booklet to encourage more rooftop gardens. It has been a bestseller — at \$7 a pop — and has helped many other city dwellers realize they can share the joy of gardening, even if they don't have yards. The booklet is still available through [www.sfbeautiful.org](http://www.sfbeautiful.org).

The city's planning code doesn't make it simple to get a permit to create a rooftop garden, so most people don't ask. The political leadership to change city policy has not yet emerged.

"That remains to be done," Arsham says. "As the green movement continues, I can see the rules being reworked to encourage more roof gardens."

After more than two decades of gardening on top of her house, Arsham

offers two simple pieces of advice: Watch your roots. And pay attention to maintenance.

She has the wooden deck restained every three years, and the deck in turn has protected the roof underneath from the ravages of wind and sun.

As in any garden on the ground, there have been challenges from pests. In addition to birds, there are sometimes slugs and roof rats and even the occasional raccoon.

"I haven't had a coyote yet, but I wouldn't be surprised," she says. Her attitude is live and let live — except for the slugs.

The neighbors have complimented her on brightening their outlook, and her efforts have inspired at least two more gardens atop nearby homes.

"People come up and say, 'Well I could do this,'" she says.

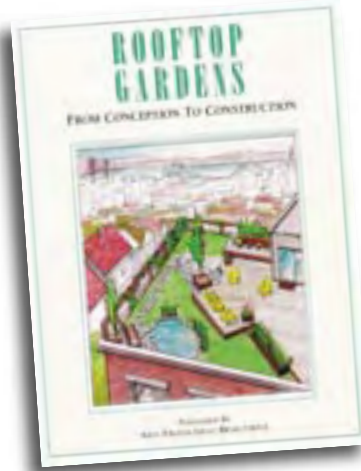
**H**ER HUSBAND has been supportive, but he steadfastly refuses to help with the heavy lifting.

"If I want it, I have to carry it," Arsham says.

He does take on the weekly watering duties when she's out of town, and it's clear that both Arsham and her husband derive great pleasure from climbing up the stairs to

their garden in the sky.

"It's like a place in the country with no driving," he says. "When we come up here it's like we're not in the city anymore."



Practical guidance on how to create a rooftop garden is offered in a booklet written by volunteers at San Francisco Beautiful. Visit [www.sfbeautiful.org](http://www.sfbeautiful.org).

## Growing More, Watering Less



Succulents add visual interest, but take little water, says local gardener Diana Arsham.

succulents," she says. "They take very little water, and they have such interesting shapes. They add visual interest even without showy flowers."

She waters only once a week, except in the rainy season, when she doesn't water at all. And she waters by hand, rather than with the automated drip system many gardeners prefer, maintaining that it results in a closer connection with her plants and uses less water.

A visit to her rooftop garden on a sunny afternoon in early March reveals a riot of succulents in variegated colors, shapes and sizes — and not a few showy flowers, including blazing orange blooms on ice plants and yellow spikes on chocolate colored aeoniums.

"We pretty much bloom in the winter," she says. "Summer blooms take too much water."

Many of her plants are in fact summer bloomers from the southern hemisphere — especially Australia, Chile and South Africa. They do well in San Francisco's temperate climate. Native California plants also naturally do well in the city's wet winters and dry summers.

**D**IANA Arsham's rooftop garden has changed considerably in the 25 years since she grew her first crop of pole beans and saw them eaten by the birds.

Vegetables take far more vigilance — and water — than other plants she has embraced as her ecological consciousness has grown and she has become ever more committed to permaculture — sustainable permanent agriculture that requires little water.

"I've been blessed by happening onto