



Designing Your Rooftop On A Budget: Tips To Create Your Dream Rooftop Space Without Splurging

Urban Designers and Architects Offer Tips for Homeowners Looking to Get Creative

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Lavish rooftop designs showcasing high-end furniture, water features and gorgeous gardens are what dreams are made of for the majority of urban homeowners. Unfortunately for many, those dreams are squashed when design and architectural cost estimates make their way into the discussion. Not all is lost, though—there are still plenty of ways for homeowners to create a beautiful rooftop on a budget.

Just ask Amber Freda, owner and operator of Amber Freda Landscape Design for the last 13 years. Based in New York City, she specializes in high-end residential designs for rooftop

gardens, terrace balconies, ground-level gardens, courtyards, decks, patios and much more.

Although the bulk of her client base utilizes the most expensive range of products, Freda says there are plenty of ways homeowners can spruce up their own designs without breaking the bank.

“A drip irrigation system is definitely the best investment because it pays for itself within the first year by greatly reducing the need for replacement plantings,” she says.

Freda says by scouring through inexpensive outdoor furniture stores and mainstream home improvement stores like Home Depot, West Elm and IKEA, people can save a large amount of money to potentially be distributed elsewhere. Buying pre-fabricated pergolas rather than custom building them is also a way to cut costs.

Beyond pergolas and furniture, filling in the empty spaces with flowers and plants is not only beautiful, but also cost-efficient if you do it yourself. But there are a lot of things to keep in mind. Freda compares gardening on a rooftop to gardening on top of a mountain. People need to pick plants that can survive at higher elevations and endure mother nature’s elements.

Plants with big leaves like elephant ears or cannas are shredded apart by the high winds on a rooftop. Bottom-heavy plants like conifers are less likely to be blown over.

“I tend to pick multi-branched trees or lower-growing trees like crape myrtles, birch trees and weeping maples because they all do better in the wind,” Freda says. “Ornamental grasses also do very well on rooftop gardens.

The “do it yourself” mentality offers homeowners an opportunity to keep wallets a bit heavier. However, there is quite a bit of risk involved if they’re not experts. Creating a rooftop isn’t as easy as putting some furniture and vegetation on a roof. There are loads of safety concerns to consider as well.

Jeff Wiedmeyer, Architect with Flad Architects in New York City, says if the integrity of the roof’s weatherproof roofing membrane is compromised by a heavy table, chair, grill or planter, it could penetrate through and lead to leaks on the floor below.

“This can bring havoc and unexpected expenses to repair the roof and water damaged spaces below,” Wiedmeyer says. “It is very important to protect the membrane with additional layers where anticipated excessive weight is expected.”

Not only that, Wiedmeyer says homeowners need to plan for positive drainage of rain and melting snow.

“Standing water when occasional is to be expected, but accidentally creating a dam or sloping the walking surface towards the building or away from a drain is an invitation for roof membrane failure.”

Understanding and taking into account every potential issue that could arise when designing a rooftop can seem daunting. That's why Freda says it's important for homeowners to really do their homework by purchasing books and reading blogs on rooftop gardens or small space design.

"Most plant nurseries will also give people free design advice as part of the process of selling plants to you, so I would definitely recommend taking advantage of that," she says.

Ultimately, if you can't do the project yourself, Wiedmeyer suggests finding an expert. While in the end it may add onto homeowners' bottom-line design costs, it may be worth it to save the time, headaches and costly mistakes by learning to do something for the first time.

"It's always beneficial to seek out the designer's past client and discuss with them their impressions of the design professional and whether they feel the price fit the quality of service," Wiedmeyer says. "It doesn't hurt to select two or three designers to do this research on, either."