

Interior designer Valerie Onor transformed this rooftop space on Manhattan's upper east side. She was inspired to create a lush, richly flowered, country-style garden.

# COUNTRY QUIETUDE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CITY

THIS ROOFTOP GARDEN, DESIGNED IN THE ENGLISH COUNTRY STYLE, CREATES A CALMING RETREAT IN THE MIDDLE OF NEW YORK CITY

WRITTEN BY CAROLYN M. RUNYON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILLIP ENNIS

**Five years ago, when Valerie Onor, of Valerie Onor Interior Design, was looking for a new home in New York City, she told her husband she would love a little outdoor garden space, never imagining she would end up with 1,500 square feet of lush green and richly flowered rooftop splendor in the middle of Manhattan's upper east side. "It's a magical place," Onor admits, "with lively color against a backdrop of varied evergreens. We've entertained as many as seventy-five people here, but our favorite time is enjoying a casual breakfast or lovely lunch for two amidst the greenery and the wonderful pre-World War II buildings that provide the picturesque cityscape around us."**

Painting a richly planted landscape on a rooftop canvas presented quite an unusual and unexpected challenge. "The floors of the roof area could not be changed, as the tiles were specifically designed for that use. They are removable and allow access below for maintenance and repairs of the building," Onor explains. "Of course, there was no soil on the roof, so we had to plant everything in pots, but weight was a concern, so we had to be very careful about the planters we chose. According to the co-op regulations, we were not allowed to attach anything to the vintage brick exterior of the building, so we had to do some innovative things to bring light to the garden." All of these obstacles required creative solutions, which Onor successfully achieved.

Using the terra-cotta-style tiles as a base, Onor and Katherine Parker Garden Design, in New York City, acquired lightweight fabricated fiberglass pots, urns, and tubs with an estate

garden look. Creating layers, with a variety of sized and colored evergreens in larger pots in the background and smaller pots with seasonal flowers in the front, Onor developed her "personal Shangri-La," as she calls it. "The lush greens offer a feeling of serenity, and the density of the layers creates a natural-looking barrier providing privacy," she says. "The smaller pots can be moved to add a touch of color wherever needed."

Lighting was a particular test of Onor's creativity. Because lights could not be mounted on the exterior walls, lighting along the ground aimed at the plantings creates atmosphere against the evening sky. But loads of candles strategically placed in the garden create the romance. Table candles light quiet dinners for six. Tall stakes topped with glass tubes holding a candle each are placed in every planter surrounding the garden. "The result is amazingly spiritual," says Onor. "Our guests love the ambience and never want to leave our dinner parties."

The furnishings are a mix of antiques, creating that English garden feel. "I don't like going to a furniture store and buying a set," Onor says. "I would rather browse antique shops and flea markets and invent my own combinations."

The patio wraps around the residence. The east and west garden areas are quite spacious and are where most of the dining and socializing areas are located. The north side is wide enough to present a walkway and a few intimate sitting areas. There are two antique chairs that have brightly colored pink-toned cushions in Zoffany Antilles with leather cording. A white iron *étagère* patterned with lattice beautifully camouflages a





Lighting plays an important part in creating the right ambience when entertaining. Lights along the ground aimed at the plantings create atmosphere against the evening sky, candles strategically placed in the garden create romance, and table candles light quiet dinners for six.





building pipe and holds an angel statue that Onor has owned for years. “I always use angels in my designs,” she notes. “They are part of the spirit of everything I create and are my signature.”

The east garden is arranged as a sitting area, with an iron sofa and two chairs, enhanced by bright-lime-colored cushions with huge peonies in a Lee Jofa Sketchbook Peony pattern. Striped pillows that pick up the limes, pinks, and oranges of the cushions provide an accent. Finally, a comfortable chaise with cushions in Tobago by Zoffany completes the space. This outdoor living room is perfect for conversation with friends or a quiet afternoon with a good book.

The west garden holds a vintage glass-top table and chairs that were purchased separately, then custom painted in a soft teal. The four side chairs are cushioned in Giati Jacquard Encore Monarch Dijon, a lovely caramel color with embroidered butterflies. The two armchairs wear cushions of a coordinated stripe from Walters Wicker. “Color is key and plays a very important part in my designs,” explains Onor. “I believe color makes a space come alive, creates the atmosphere, and sets the scene.” In these garden rooms, Onor’s colors lift the spirits and whisk one from city hubbub to country quietude.

This English country garden welcomes nature with its butterfly bush, which attracts lots of beautiful butterflies, Onor says. “We saw quite a few hummingbirds this past summer and even a cardinal,” she says. “I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw one of these spectacular red birds in New York City.” At one time Onor wished for a home in the country, but she says she now feels blessed and fortunate to have her country garden right here in New York City. ■

With juniper and arborvitae as a backdrop, Valerie Onor’s English country garden offers seasonal enchantments year-round.

In spring, plantings include a variety of pansies and violas, accented by taller perennials like columbine and bleeding heart.

Summer brings a lush selection of annuals and perennials. Petunias, geranium, and *Bacopa* join upright flowers like angelonia, agastache, gaillardia, browallia, abutilon, and salvias. Pink and green *Alternanthera ficoidea* ‘Partytime’ or burgundy *Iresine herbstii* ‘Purple Lady’ provide additional color accents.

Hydrangeas bloom profusely from summer into fall. In fall, pumpkins and fall plantings are added to the garden.

Winter’s outdoor arrangements are created with cut branches of balsam, pine, cedar, and holly tucked between the Japanese andromeda and variegated holly plants. Taller evergreens are lit for a festive holiday touch.

A great variety of roses, a crab apple tree, wisteria, Scotch broom, lantana, and Mandevilla complement the other plants throughout the flowering seasons.