

GARDEN DESIGN

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Glam Gardens by Top Designers:
Caruncho, Hoerr, Marmol & Radziner



living green

PRAIRIE LIGHT

A SKYLINE MEADOW, DONE UP CHICAGO-STYLE,
GETS TO THE POETIC ROOT OF URBAN GREENING

STORY BY LAUREN GRYMES ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT SHIGLEY



A ROOFTOP PRAIRIE, NESTLED 10 STORIES INTO Chicago's skyline at one of the nation's most posh addresses, is a working metaphor for renewable living: It elevates as it grounds. As Illinois' virgin grasslands inspired endless possibilities, so does the 100-foot-high urban meadow by Douglas Hoerr lift the spirits of those venturing out to this Windy City roofscape. While the garden appears to float amid neighboring Gold Coast skyscrapers, it is also symbolic of Midwestern stability; it's as if the plants send taproots down through the oh-so-luxurious building below and anchor it to a reality deeper than the glamorous district on which it stands. And, just as prairie was surveyed into farmland, Hoerr — principal of Hoerr Schaudt Landscape Architects and a Midwest farm boy at heart — evolved his microcosmic version into an abstract grid pattern that represents the region's agricultural history, while giving the garden a modern quality that sets it smack dab in now.

Hyperbole aside, the plain fact is that the year-old garden at a condo conversion on Michigan Avenue (in the Magnificent Mile shopping mecca) is designed with eco-friendly living in mind. Pergolas are clad in sustainable, toxin-free ipe wood. Modular, insular rooftop planting trays cool the building in summer and warm it in winter, absorb noise and are a sponge for storm runoff. An easy-care plant mix — including grasses, nodding onion, creeping phlox and garlic chives, and the reseeding tender perennial tall verbena — doesn't need much

The high-end feel of the sleek design by Chicago firm Hoerr Schaudt Landscape Architects glosses over the roofscape's inherent greenness: It is built with sustainable and recycled materials and repurposes a stark, half-acre rooftop expanse into an uplifting urban meadow.

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additional water, filters air pollutants and holds its own against weather extremes ranging from subzero temperatures to suffocatingly hot whipping winds. But what truly makes the project green, Hoerr says, "is that we pushed for the design to occupy as much space as possible and for it to include as much vegetation as possible." The Hoerr Schaudt team, working with building owners and developers, took an existing half-acre rooftop that Hoerr calls "terrible — a blinding white parking lot" and created a city escape that is not only a condominium selling point but a relieving greensward for occupants of the concrete canyon.

The rooftop garden is private for The Residences at 900 and the people who live there have an exhilarating open-air cocktail venue — the sunset views are amazing. (The roof is stepped down and west of the condo tower, which faces water to the east; thus the garden is also symbolic of "where prairie meets Lake Michigan," Hoerr says.) A generous ipe wood and recycled-concrete paver platform — covered by a pair of pergolas and decked with stylish tables, chairs and lounges — provides a sense of intimacy in what could have been a daunting exposure, given the looming skyscrapers. But those skyscrapers make an incomparably energetic backdrop, particularly as dusk falls and the city turns on the lights. And, at 10 floors above street level, the roofscape is high enough to be titillating without being downright scary.

The meadow adds its own quiet contrast as the plants



Douglas Hoerr wanted to give west-facing residents an inspiring view and did so by drafting a modern-edged grid built with a tray system that includes some 20,000 plants — autumn moor grass (*Sesleria autumnalis*), native *Allium cernuum* and *Verbena bonariensis* among them. When laying out a green roof, Hoerr says to "think in patterns, as roofs are most often viewed from above."



dip in breezy waves. A boardwalk invites strolling for those who like to move, and for those who like to cook — rather than shoot down to one of the city's acclaimed eateries — there are commercial-grade gas grills. "The garden is enjoyed every single day," says Jaimie Bulla, development manager for Development Management Associates of Chicago. He describes birthday barbecues, dinner parties, lunchtime cookouts and folks simply taking in the air — making the project, he says, "absolutely worth the effort. We think of it as not only great for the people who live there but also as a good step in the direction of urban greening." The design has also paid off in accolades: It won the Green Roofs for Healthy Cities' 2008 award of excellence in the intensive residential category.

The immense 900 North Michigan structure also houses the Four Seasons Hotel and high-end retail stores. The Hoerr design crowns the hotel's ballroom, swimming pool and a parking garage, replacing a bare arena that did, at least, have a running track. Because it was a retrofit, the new roofscape followed structural limits dictating how much soil and other weight could be added, and where. A standard green-roof tray system — in 4- and 8-inch depths — was manipulated atop polystyrene insulation to level the entertainment deck with the field. The plants were chosen to withstand what Hoerr refers to as "hot-baking" and offer multi-season texture. There are also small trees and shrubs, including Japanese tree lilacs and cranberry cotoneaster, which add height, screening and seasonal change.

Hoerr, for his part, is eager to shove the known boundaries of rooftop horticulture and design past the sedum same-old. "Designers should be creative, move beyond the clichéd response," he says. "We need to shine a light on our profession and show people that green roofs can be environmental and beautiful." 🍃



Hoerr's design is clean and simple on the surface but is loaded with symbolism, as in the rooftop's graphic layout which represents the way native prairie was turned into farmland — but also reflects the architectural matrix in a city famous for its architecture. The grasses provide an alluring "nonstatic nature," he says.



GO-TO GREEN-ROOF GUIDE

FOR STARTERS

Don't experiment with more than five plant types. What grows on the ground in certain conditions doesn't mean it will work on a rooftop, which is subject to dramatic temperature, light and wind extremes.

CONSULT EXPERTS

Leak-test the roof, and hire an engineer to confirm load capacity. Shallow green-roof systems for inaccessible areas require a load capacity of 15 to 30 pounds per square foot. Roofscapes with more plants and room for people need at least 150 pounds per, and trees need at least 300 pounds per.

EASY ON THE H₂O

Rooftop irrigation systems are mainly backup for unusually dry conditions. Plants happy in green-roof trays are hardy, drought-tolerant species, which can quickly get too much water and rot.