

“Everything
in this garden
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Rose Gray's tiny roof terrace is packed with crops growing in pots, from blackberries for making jam, to rocket and other salad leaves

Cooks' gardens Rose Gray

A belief in the importance of fresh produce is as much a way of life as a business philosophy for the founder of the River Café, says **Kevin Smith**. Photos by Sarah Cuttle

Growing fresh produce to use for cooking is something that comes naturally to Rose Gray. Indeed, since the day she and Ruth Rogers opened London's renowned River Café, complete with its kitchen garden, her philosophy has been clear: good cooking is about using fresh, seasonal and organic ingredients.

As someone with such a passion for everything fresh, it's no surprise that Rose takes her love of gardening home with her. However smart the image of the River Café, Rose's private garden is a tiny roof terrace atop a flat in north-west London.

In a space no more than 5m x 5m (17ft x 17ft), Rose has managed to

cram in literally thousands of plants. And every single one is in a container. As I emerge from the steep stairs out on to the terrace, Rose's head pops out from behind the greenery. "I'm just picking the tomatoes for lunch," she calls out.

Rose is proud of her garden, and everywhere you look there is something delectable to eat. "Everything in this garden is edible," she explains. "Even the flowers have to earn their keep. I use the verbena for verbena tea and borage flowers for Pimm's in the summer." Among other culinary delights, Rose has successfully grown olives, cherries, blackcurrants, figs, grapes, horseradish and chillies.

"I have two fig trees, but I can't find one of them," she laughs. Only someone with so many plants could lose a tree in such a tiny space.

Everything in Rose's garden can be transformed into a delicious dish in her kitchen. Rocket and sorrel are on hand for salads, and a vast array of herbs are just by the door for an aromatic treat, and for seasoning.

"I've always enjoyed gardening and I used to grow a lot when I had a proper garden," she says. "There's such a strong relationship between gardening and cooking. One doesn't really work without the other."

Every crop is put to good use. "One year I managed to make two entire



LEFT Rose uses the tomato 'Costoluto Fiorentino' to make a delicious bruschetta
RIGHT A fistful of home-grown basil tops off the dish for a taste of the Mediterranean

pots of jam from my blackberries," she chuckles. "I know it's not much, but I was so pleased, as all the blackberries came from this tiny space."

Of course, it's not all about food, and Rose says she simply adores being outside and making things grow. "I sit on the roof terrace all the time and love the fact I've got somewhere outdoors. I adore the contrast between big and spindly leaves, and am fascinated by unusual plants. I bring a lot of seeds back from foreign countries, particularly Italy, to see if I can make them work here."

Ripe and ready

Rose nearly strips her tomato plants bare for the bruschetta she makes for me. The variety, 'Costoluto Fiorentino', is an old-fashioned beef tomato from Florence. Looking over the bowl, which is brimming with ripe fruit, she exclaims, "There, that's not bad considering they're grown in a pot. Especially as I got the seeds free from the front of a magazine."

Rose's own garden and that of the River Café exist in harmony. Rose sows her seeds on the roof terrace then grows them on at the River Café's garden, and she often brings produce home from the restaurant to supplement her home-grown crops.

The professional kitchens and garden at the restaurant work under the same principles as Rose's small kitchen and garden at home. The chefs at the restaurant harvest organic produce from the garden outside the kitchen and use it immediately, maintaining the philosophy that only the freshest ingredients will do. Since the restaurant opened in 1987, Rose and business partner

Ruth Rogers have encouraged suppliers to bring Italian produce to London. Now, lorryloads arrive daily with artichokes from Rome and borlotti beans from Puglia.

As we move into the kitchen, and Rose begins to prepare tomato bruschetta, two words spring to mind: simplicity and speed. To ensure that no natural flavours or goodness are lost she works very quickly without a strict recipe, quantities or method. Bread, basil, garlic and tomatoes all come together to form this classic Italian dish.

When adding the tomatoes to the ciabatta, Rose simply picks up one half of a fruit and squeezes it on to the bread, pips, juice and skin squirting out between her fingers. "So many people chop the tomatoes, but it's so nice to squeeze them into the bread. This way you really get the flavours," she explains. From picking the tomatoes to completing the dish took no more than 10 minutes.

Rose's achievements in such a tiny space are inspiring. If she can grow so much food on a tiny roof terrace, just think what can be achieved in an average-sized garden. And her success with containers is a lesson to us all. From fruiting grapevines to olives in pots, her triumphs with sometimes-tricky crops should encourage even the most novice gardener to try a few container tomatoes.

"Things just don't taste the same when they've been in a box for a couple of days," believes Rose. "You have to eat fruit and vegetables that have just been picked and are very ripe. And don't be defeated. It is possible to grow loads of crops in this country – you've just got to give try them." □



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Rose Gray's notebook

Squashed tomato bruschetta

SERVES 4

2 large, ripe beefsteak tomatoes
4 thick slices of sourdough bread
2 garlic cloves
2 dried chillies
Handful of basil
Sea salt
Black pepper
Extra virgin olive oil

METHOD

1 Peel the garlic and cut each tomato in half. Crumble the chilli. 2 Grill the bread on both sides and lightly rub one side with the garlic. 3 Squash the cut side of the tomato into the bread, breaking it up so that the juices are absorbed. 4 Sprinkle with chilli, salt and pepper. Drizzle with olive oil and scatter with the basil.



ABOVE Only the freshest bread is used. It is grilled on both sides before garlic is rubbed in
LEFT Rose uses freshly picked tomatoes and squashes them with her fingers before adding the basil

Favourite varieties

"The first tomatoes of the summer are Italian. The English varieties start at the end of July. We buy most of ours from two growers, who have experimented with around 30 varieties. As we have so much choice, matching the kind of tomato to the recipe is part of the enjoyment.

The very large bulbous ones, some weighing up to half a kilo, are perfect raw in salads and with bruschetta. Their skins are thin, with dense pulp, few seeds and juices, and a sweet flavour. Varieties include 'Brandywine' and 'Jubilee'.

Plum tomatoes are good for sauces, and the ripest make the sweetest sauce. They have fewer seeds, more flesh and less juice. Their skins are usually thicker, so they are easy to peel. Good plum varieties are 'Roma' and 'San Marzano'.

We store tomatoes outside, not in the fridge, to help the flavour develop. When removing the skin, pierce it with a pointed knife. Place in boiling water, and peel as soon as they are cool."



Tomato suppliers

- » **Edwin Tucker & Sons**
01364 652233
www.edwintucker.com
- » **Seeds of Italy**
020 8930 2516
www.seedsofitaly.co.uk
- » **Simply Vegetables from Plants of Distinction**
01449 721720
www.plantsofdistinction.co.uk
- » **The Organic Gardening Catalogue**
0845 130 1304
www.organiccatalog.com
- » **Thompson & Morgan**
01473 695225
www.thompson-morgan.com

The River Café

The River Café is at Thames Wharf, Rainville Road, London W6. Call 020 7386 4200 to book a table. You can buy *River Café Cook Book Easy*, the latest recipe book by Rose Gray and Ruth Rogers, for just £18 inc p&p, saving £2 on the RRP. Call 0870 350 6094 with your credit card details. Look out for *River Café Two Easy* in book shops from May (Ebury & Vermilion, £20).

