







## honey from a car park

In some places, Annemie Maes' Brussels edible garden – perched on top of a multi-storey car park – looks like a piece of Mediterranean scrubland, all olive trees, thyme, sage and fennel, and buzzing with bees. Then her careful landscaping comes to an abrupt halt and you can see all too clearly the barren, blank canvas that she started with. 'The rooftop was completely dead. You can see with your own eyes exactly how it was. It's wonderful how nature moves in when you give it a chance.'

But it is the bees that she is most delighted to accommodate. 'This is all for the bees,' she says. Annemie is an artist with a bee obsession. She is fascinated by the way they work together – 'more like cells in a single organism than individuals.'

She produces two crops of delicious honey each year, plus natural honeycomb. The spring-harvest honey is floral and light; the summer one, made primarily from the pollen of the many lime trees that line the Brussels streets, is spicier, with a minty aftertaste.

But the real success of the plot is the bees themselves. Annemie has elevated their status to that of art. She has created maps of Brussels that track their foraging routes (which is how she knows about the lime trees) and has set up hives on other rooftops, the foraging routes of which overlap. Ultimately there will be a bee chain, right across Brussels. Annemie has also created a transparent hive as an art installation and has made many bee videos.

The roof garden feeds Annemie, too, producing olives, alpine strawberries (*Fragaria vesca*), apples, apricots, redcurrants, tomatoes and herbs, but the *raison d'être* of this once-desolate, windswept spot is really as a pantry for her beloved bees.





### growing notes

'I knew from the start that I wanted to create a real garden up here,' says Annemie, 'not your typical roof garden in containers.' She was helped in her quest by the strength of the roof: built for housing tens of cars, it was easily able to hold the weight of a garden.

A specialist company lined the roof with a waterproof liner, then with a layer of polystyrene and then with a layer of mineral wool. Next they moved in the large olive trees that are such a feature of the roof: they are the only plants in this landscaped part of the roof garden that are still growing in containers. Finally they pumped masses of lava chippings and organic matter onto the roof and sculpted it to create banks, hillocks and pathways, and to cover the olive trees' containers. Then Annemie started planting.

Of course, a great many of her plants are grown for the pollen they provide for the bees, including phacelia, sedum, sage, fennel and winter savory (*Satureja montana*). All of these thrive in the well-drained conditions created by the lava chippings. And a low-growing thyme has found its own way here, a detail that delights Annemie.

Slowly, Annemie is colonising more areas of the roof. She now has a greenhouse on a higher level and a more traditional containerised roof garden for growing vegetables.

But she also finds herself eyeing up the expanses of dead roof that sit alongside her very much alive one, with a view to taking them over as well. 'My work is this garden and the bees. I'm rather in love with my bees.'











