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Rooftop Gardens

Common Problems

Practice and experience have shown us that rooftop gardens in Chicago come with their own unique set of challenges and concerns. With proper planning and knowledgeable installation, it is possible to prepare for those conditions and have a successful garden space in an unlikely location. Below are some important issues to consider:

Hardiness

Chicago at ground level resides in the 5b growing zone, making it possible to grow a wide variety of plants. Add elevation, extreme wind conditions and proximity to Lake Michigan, and a rooftop garden quickly becomes a different climate entirely. Anyone planning a rooftop garden should immediately assume they are dealing with a Zone 4 climate. If the location is right along the lakeshore or at the upper floors of a highrise, assume it to be Zone 3. Picking plants that can handle weather extremes will be your first step towards success.

Water and Neglect

Roof gardens are in essence large containers and will dry out much faster than gardens on the ground. In sunny and windy locations, this problem is multiplied. We highly recommend either an in ground or drip irrigation system whenever possible. The smaller the container, the more often it will need to be watered. If irrigation or regular hand watering is impossible or improbable, plant selection should be made with drought tolerance in mind.

Root Growth

All plants in containers, especially large growing plants, will eventually fill the space they are given and begin to fail or suffer because of it. There is no easy solution to this. One option for smaller trees is removing the root ball and trimming the exterior roots back. This is not a permanent solution, but buys the plant extra time in its container. Root issues are usually only a problem with large trees or plants in small containers. The average life for such plant material, depending on how aggressive the roots are and the space constraints, is between 3-7 years.

Drainage Issues

The second largest cause of failure on rooftops is lack of drainage. Soil that does not drain properly can quickly become toxic to plants. All free standing containers should freely drain through the bottom holes at all times. Signs of drainage problems include yellowing leaves, the presence of gnats and flies, an unpleasant smell to the soil or actual standing water that is not absorbed into the soil.