

In Conversation with... Patrick Blanc

We caught up with the man known for his vertical gardens when he was in town for the opening of Printemps Doha, located in Doha Oasis, where he has created green walls in the restaurants Matthew Kenney and Wild & The Moon.





Are you a botanist or a landscape designer? How would you describe yourself?

I'm definitely a botanist. I studied tropical botany at university in Paris, before specialising in the adaptive ways plants survive beneath the understory on the rainforest floor, where there's only one per cent of full sunlight. I wanted to find out how plants cope with such a low level of light. Now, years later, I work at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) in Paris, but well before that, I grew vertical gardens as a hobby. So I'm a botanist, but I also play with plants.

What inspired you to invent the vertical garden?

When I was 12, I read in a German magazine that putting the roots of a plant into an aquarium was a good way to take out all of the excess minerals. So, I tried it. It was a kind of biological filter for my fish – for the equilibrium of the aquarium. I added more and more plants, fixed them to the wall with string. Eventually, I thought that instead of only having water at the bottom, it would be good to have the water flowing on the surface of the wall, recycling the water of the aquarium. When I was in Thailand when I was 19, I saw plants growing in a very thin layer on tree branches. In nature, when they are regularly watered by rain, it's enough, because they are growing in only a few millimetres of moss covering rocks. So I decided to use the thinnest material on my wall.

When did you first show the world your vertical gardens?

The first real installation was in 1986 at Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie – the biggest science museum in Europe. I developed a conceptual work for this museum – a screen growing with plants, just like the outdoor screens of Wild & The Moon at Printemps Doha. The public was interested, but I was more famous at the university, where I studied new plant species. I patented the idea in 1988, but it wasn't until 1994, when I was invited to the international garden festival in Chaumont-sur-Loire, that I created

screens in the open air – one of them seven metres high – and suddenly they were a huge success. My exhibits are still there today and meanwhile I'm delighted to have completed over 300 projects around the world.

How do you choose which plants to use in your vertical gardens at Matthew Kenney?

[Patrick proudly shows us the lush vertical gardens at celebrity vegan chef Matthew Kenney's new eatery.] At first, you might think that these plants are artificial, but they aren't. They're all real! This plant has bright red flowers, while these are greenish-yellow, even though they're the same genus. These plants are very happy. You see all the new leaves? I only use plants that, in nature, grow higher on the branches of a tree or on rocks in the shade of the forest or near a waterfall. Plants are placed in the vertical garden wherever they would be in their natural habitat. These plants are from Peru, Chile, Thailand, the Philippines, Borneo, Tanzania, China. It's very important to use different species because then there's variety. I love that whenever you return to a vertical garden, it's never the same. It's always changing.

What's special about your plant designs for Wild & The Moon?

For Wild & the Moon, there is an indoor part – featuring vertical gardens – and an outdoor part, where there's a group of curved screens of different heights. Yesterday I went round a local nursery because, although most plants come from the Netherlands, some species were not available and I was surprised to find 10 species that are well cultivated here. So they'll be planted at Wild & The Moon. This is something I've done for other projects in San Francisco, Bangalore and Shin-Yamaguchi Station in Japan, for example. There I also used local plants. For each project, there's something new, something different. I love it.

Wild & The Moon café: located on the ground floor.

Matthew Kenney restaurant: located on the second floor. ♣