

## NEW LOOK

*Dense green foliage on a wall?  
That's what a botanist-  
landscapist has created at the  
French embassy*

# Garden on a wall

BY ELLA DATTA

The imperious, forbidding entrance of the French embassy with its acres of cold marble is undergoing a radical make-over. Done earlier in an austere post-World War II modernism, the great room is stepping into the twenty-first century with a look of lush tropical glades highlighted by a huge plasma screen reflecting images of France round the clock for colour and vibrancy. Ecology and technology, the two frontiers of this century still capable of posing mysteries, will be brought centre-stage in a dramatic gesture.

Besides the French ambassador Dominique Girard who initiated the new look, the man responsible for creating this setting of tropical exuberance on the four enormous square columns rising some 20 feet high, is a botanist-cum-landscapist, Patrick Blanc. Blanc, who has created many such vertical gardens of tropical foliage all over the world, is introducing his art to India for the first time. Says Blanc, of his creation of cascading greenery on the columns of the great hall of the embassy, "I want it to look both aesthetic and natural."

Some of his most outstanding creations can be seen in Foundation Cartier in Paris, Museum for Primitive Arts in Paris designed by the well-known French architect, Jean Nouvel, a boutique in New York, Museum for Contemporary Art at Kanazawa in Japan, a 30 metre high wall at Hotel Pershing in Paris designed by architect Andree Putman, and so many more public and private buildings. The commissions come pouring in.

Blanc patented his exciting discovery of making plants grow on a vertical built surface as 'Vegetal Wall' more than a decade ago. A botanist by profession and working as a research scientist at a French university, Blanc specialises in tropical plants growing in rainforests. He began his search for growing plants on all kinds of surfaces as a young boy.

He had read an article on how the aquarium water can be kept fresh by growing plants



## Vertical Funda

**Vegetal Wall:** A vertical surface is lined with two-three layers of pure synthetic felt-like material. Depending on the layout design, a horizontal slit is made on the top layer of the felt-like material, creating a pocket. The plant is bedded in the pocket and kept in place by stapling the edges of the slit. The ground material is kept damp by drops of water trickling down from the irrigation channel. The water is mixed with a light combination of micronutrients.

and plants which like more light gradually scaling down to smaller plants towards the base. He says, "I do not like to use too many blossoming plants because after the blooms dry the plants look bedraggled." The only flowering plants that he uses are anthuriums and the like in which the foliage continues to look handsome.

The technique is simple. A vertical surface is lined with two or three layers of pure synthetic felt-like material. "You cannot have any organic material in that fabric mix, otherwise there will be decay," says Blanc. Depending on the layout design, a horizontal slit is made on the top layer of the felt-like material creating a pocket. The plant is bedded in the pocket and kept in place by stapling the edges of the slit. The ground material is kept damp by drops of water trickling down from the irrigation channel. The water is mixed with a light combination of micronutrients.

While the actual planting procedure is simple and quick, Blanc takes a long time in designing the planting and seeking out the right combination of plants to suit the setting. Like an artist playing with fields of colour and texture, Blanc also creates a detailed mosaic of the planting design, subtly blending colours and designs. Towards the ceiling, where it is closer to the sources of light, he uses the larger plants which can be easily seen from the ground level

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At the French Embassy, Blanc has chosen some 70 species of foliage plants. Among the many types he has selected, there are varieties of ficus, tradescantia, philodendron, anthurium, spathiphyllum, monstera, different ferns, syngonium, begonia among many others. He has collected more than 3000 plants for covering 100 square metres of wall surface.

Says Blanc, "I searched through the best nurseries of Delhi to get the right combination of plants. I even went to Assam to collect some unusual species from the forests." After the planting is over, Blanc returns to Paris but will come again after two months to see how his recreated tropical forest scene is faring. According to Blanc, such vertical green spaces can be a do-it-yourself hobby on a small scale in one's home. But if it is a public or commercial space covering a large area, then one has to commission him.

The result of this brilliant concept is a verdant, romantic Garden of Eden right in the entrance hall of the French embassy.