

REVIEW

The Green Man Whose Gardens Defy Gravity

CREATING:
PATRICK BLANC,
GARDEN DESIGNER

BY JULIA FLYNN SILER

SINCE BIBLICAL TIMES, gardens have been horizontal, with flowers and plants sprouting out of the ground. Patrick Blanc has turned that whole notion on its side, literally. Mr. Blanc is the inventor of the vertical garden, also known as the living (or green) wall.

Mr. Blanc, 58, is a botanist with France's National Center for Scientific Research, the country's giant science and technology agency. He also has a private practice designing gardens. Among the more than 250 he has installed around the world, his most famous are at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, the Caixa Forum Museum in Madrid and the French embassy in New Delhi. A celebrity among horticulturalists, he's even got a new kind of begonia named after him, *Begonia blancii*, after discovering it two years ago while trekking through a rainforest in the Philippines. These days, a Blanc-designed garden commands well into the six figures.

When he is not on a plane to the Middle East or exploring a remote rainforest in Hawaii to study native plants, Mr. Blanc works at the home he shares with singer Pascal Hèni just outside Paris's city limits. There, he has a desk placed on top of a large aquarium, about 20 by 23 feet. "I see the fish swimming beneath my legs," he said. "It is a dream." His office includes a lush living wall, covered with plants.

He begins his day at about 7 a.m., often with a glass of white wine or champagne, which he said is relaxing. He then looks at all his plants, the 2,000 small fish that live in his aquarium, the birds and the lizards to make sure they're all well. He keeps 10 different kinds of birds in his home, which he explains provide a biological form of insect control. He does most of his experimentation with plants and different vertical systems at his home, parts of which resemble a jungle.

Mr. Blanc will then turn to his current project, drawing his sketches in pencil. He marks the area where each kind of plant should go and scribbles their names down in tiny print in each of their intended locations. He relies on his memory for the plant names and may use thousands of individual plants, from hundreds of species, in a single installation. In all projects, he chooses an "atmosphere"—perhaps jungle-like with many tropical plants, or showy, using plants with abundant blooms.



PATRICK BLANC with the garden he planted for the Drew School, in San Francisco.

Drew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal

"Of course, I visualize what it will look like but, hopefully, there are always some surprises," he said.

His desk is next to the 29-year-old vertical garden that he maintains in his home. Because he finds it difficult to sit for long stretches of time, he generally gets up from his desk every 30 to 45 minutes or so, taking a break to stretch his legs, feed his fish and tend his

plants. "When you move, you think differently," he said.

On long airplane rides, such as the 14-hour one he took from Paris to San Francisco in early October, he'll tuck pencils, sketch paper and a steel pencil sharpener into his green Tumi shoulder bag. He's currently working on the plan for an outdoor garden in Bahrain, which he calls the Muharraq Green Gate and

will sit at the entrance of Bahrain's historic part of the town. He considers it an unusual challenge because daytime temperatures for several months a year might average 122 degrees Fahrenheit.

Once he reached San Francisco, he bounded toward his creation at the Drew School, a private high school in the lower Pacific Heights area. The garden, which he planted nine months ear-

lier, is his largest in the U.S., using more than 4,500 plants, and it is already starting to bloom. Small orange-red blossoms peep through the foliage. "Ah, flowers," he said. "Good for the hummingbirds!"

He chose a different kind of challenge by deciding to use only California native plants in the Drew garden. Before designing it, he spent several days visiting local botanical gardens, nurseries and preserves. On his recent trip, he spent two days up in Humboldt County, home of the giant Sequoia trees, to study what was growing on the forest floor beneath them. In his bag, he carried a guide to California state parks. "My inspiration is nature," he said.

Mr. Blanc himself resembles a tropical wood sprite. Nicknamed "The Green Man," he favors green shirts with bold botanical prints, green shoes and for the past 25 years has dyed his hair green because he likes the color. Since he was an adolescent, he has grown his fingernails long, which he said his parents initially objected to. He wears a ring woven from green and brown threads on his left hand.

'I see the fish swimming beneath my legs,' he says of his desk on top of a large aquarium. 'It is a dream.'

As a child, Mr. Blanc was fascinated by aquariums and began experimenting with using plants to purify their waters, eventually tying the plants to a plank jutting out of the aquarium. By providing the vertically positioned plants with water and nutrients, he created a kind of plant waterfall coming out of his tank.

At age 19, he took his first trip to the tropics, visiting the Khao Yai National Park in Thailand, lush with plants that grew up steep vertical cliffs. "From then on, I understood that plants could sprout at any height, not merely from the ground, in order to then climb," he wrote in "The Vertical Garden."

In 1986, he created his first public vertical garden. His big breakthrough came eight years later, with his installation at France's prestigious Chaumont-Sur-Loire garden festival—he had trekked to Chile to find plants there that might adapt to the Chaumont's climate.

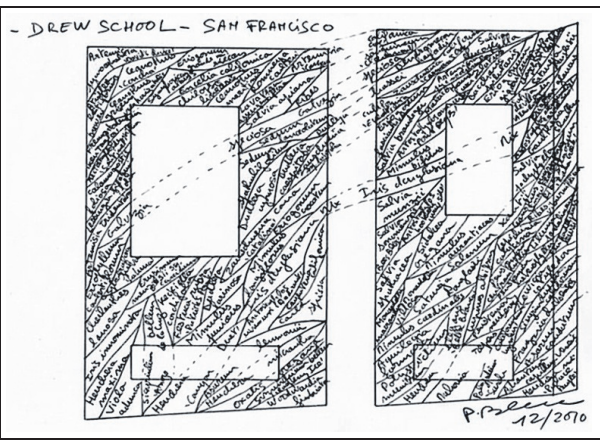
He said he travels about 50% of the time and that new places fuel his creativity. Mr. Blanc explained that he has been inspired by everything from a strangler fig growing out of the Ta Prohm temple in Angkor, Cambodia, to lichen hanging from the forests near the Ngorongoro crater in Tanzania. For each living wall that he creates, it is the place itself that inspires him.

► Watch a video on Patrick Blanc and his gardens at WSJ.com/Review.

BRINGING WALLS TO LIFE

MIX DIFFERENT PLANTS TOGETHER

Patrick Blanc will bring home treasures he finds on his travels and plant them to see what happens next: A seed from elephant dung found in Thailand became a Pandanus, which came to dominate a Philodendron.



SKETCH AND PLANT AT HOME

In addition to making sketches, like that at left for the Drew School, a private high school in San Francisco, Mr. Blanc also experiments with plants at his home, where he can keep a close eye on them.



TRY TO GO NATIVE

Mr. Blanc visits local parks and nurseries in an area he's unfamiliar with before making his plant choices. For plants for the Drew School project, arrayed on the ground at left, he sought out nurseries with California native plants.

(l-r) Patrick Blanc; Drew school

MOVING TARGETS: JOE QUEENAN



Some Expert Advice: Get a Clue



AMERICA IS FACING a serious experts crisis. The problem is: Our home-grown experts are incompetent and in many cases flat-out dumb. If things don't improve soon, we may have to loosen our immigration policy and allow foreign-born experts to enter the country from Europe, Asia and Mexico, even if they are experts on things we don't really care about. That's how serious the experts crisis has become.

I realized this last weekend when I motored down to the nation's capital to see my daughter. The day before I left, the experts assured me that while a light "dusting" of snow might await me when I returned to suburban New York, it wasn't anything to worry about. Monday morning I came home to find trees down everywhere, wires ripped out of the side of my house, no electricity, no cable, no phone, no heat and a ton of snow waiting to be shoveled.

Thanks, weather experts! Right on

the money with that one!

But it's not just the weathermen. Wherever you turn, the experts are dropping the ball. Remember all those late-summer predictions by respected economists that the country was slipping into a new recession? Bail out of stocks right now! was the message back in September. Batten down the hatches, guys! In October, the Dow Jones Industrial Average went up 9.5%. So if you moved your money out of stocks, you missed out on one of the biggest, fastest run-ups in history. Thanks, experts! Thanks for the early warning on that double dip!

The experts also said back in the spring to get out of bonds ASAP, because of inflation or loss of confidence in Congress or Greece or something. Since then, bonds have done just fine. Conversely, bond funds that did bail out of Treasuries are not doing fine. I know, because I have one of them in my 401(k). The experts were

similarly wrong about unemployment gradually tailing off later in 2011, wrong about the economy expanding at a robust rate as the year rolled along, wrong about consumer spending. For a while things looked dire, as everyone batted down the hatches.

That snowstorm will barely leave a trace. Nobody's gonna beat the Red Sox. 'Pan Am' will be a big hit. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

But in September, it turns out, consumer spending went up, which is one reason the stock market took off. You know, the stock market the experts warned us all to bail out of?

But it's not just in the fields of fi-

nance and meteorology that the experts have missed the boat. The experts were also wrong about that New England Patriots juggernaut up in Foxboro. As of this writing, the Patriots have one of the worst defenses in the NFL. They can't stop the run. They can't stop the pass. They can't stop anything. Great job, experts! Keep up the good work!

The experts also said: Nobody's gonna beat them Red Sox this year. Nobody. Well, maybe the Yankees. Or the Phillies. Or the Giants. Wrong again. This year, the eighth-best team in baseball won. The Red Sox didn't even make the playoffs. The experts were also wrong about the appeal of "The Playboy Club," "Charlie's Angels" and "Pan Am," as retro-chic proved to be a thing of the past.

The experts have been particularly inept when it comes to politics. "Watch out, Mitt, here comes Rick Perry!" they warned. Uh-oh. Yeah, and

another thing, Mitt: Watch out for Pawlenty. And Bachmann. And Rand Paul. And Paul Ryan. And Christie. And wait till Jon Huntsman jumps into the race to fill the void left by...Mitch Daniels.

Finally, the experts said: Barack Obama is toast. Finished. He's the new Jimmy Carter. This guy's had it. How's that prediction looking now? That's the one I'm really waiting on. Could be the best prediction since Dewey beats Truman, Goliath creams David, Hessians pummel colonists, Titanic due in ahead of schedule, "The Blair Witch Project" to render big-budget movies obsolete, New Coke to take America by storm.

Mind you, I'm not saying that we don't need experts. Every society needs experts. All I'm saying is that, based on recent evidence, we might need some new ones.

Now we just need some expert advice on where to find them.