

in the garden
greenthoughts

VERTICALLY VERDANT
With gardens that cascade down walls, Patrick Blanc takes landscape design to a new plane by Louisa Jones

AS A LANDSCAPE designer, Patrick Blanc is quite contrary. How does his garden grow? Vertically—to the delight of nature lovers across Europe. What Blanc calls “living walls” were first unveiled at the 1994 Chaumont Garden Festival, a horticultural showcase held every summer south of Paris. His hydroponically grown plant tapestries can now be seen at the Foundation Cartier in Paris, in the Genoa aquarium designed by Renzo Piano, and at smaller sites all over France.

Blanc’s two most recent creations hang at a Paris hotel and at a corporate retreat outside the city. The first is a 100-foot-high courtyard wall on the city’s elegant Right Bank, commissioned by the owners of the Pershing Hall hotel and designer Andrée Putman, who wanted a vivid complement for her subtle interiors. The second is a vast experimental water garden made for Vivendi Universal, a conglomerate with diverse holdings that include Universal Film Studios and one of the largest water supply companies in France. Situated on an estate northwest of Paris, the Vivendi campus was elegantly redesigned by Lionel Guibert and Pascal Cribier (well known for his work at the Tuileries gardens in Paris). These two landscape architects created a striking framework for Blanc’s rare plants: three “groves” that illustrate the ways plants deal with different environments. The conditions in

one grove range from very wet to very dry; in another, there are plants that can thrive in environments from saltwater to virtually mineral-free. The third shows how plants adapt to extremes of temperature, from icy cold to tropical heat.

Though it’s hard to imagine, as you listen to this animated young man with his stunning forelock of green and turquoise hair and his color-coordinated rain forest motif shirt, Blanc is first and foremost a botanist, specializing in jungle undergrowth. Blanc’s work as a scientist at the esteemed CNRS research



The 100-foot “living wall,” right, that botanist Patrick Blanc, above, created for the Pershing Hall hotel, Paris, holds 300 plant species.

in the garden

greenthoughts

center in Paris has taken him to New Guinea, Thailand, Bolivia, and Madagascar. Blanc adores big cities as much as wilderness. But he is not so sure about gardens. While gardens, he suggests, seem to partition nature from the daily world, his living walls weave flora into the fabric of urban life. "Imagine coming out of the subway face-to-face with a hanging jungle fragment," he says. "Right there, like a gift!" A welcome bit of "intoxicating chlorophyll" is celebrated in the words of a song Blanc wrote for his friend Pascal Héni, a well-known French chansonnier. It is a love song to glamorous ladies called Passiflora, Allamanda, Stephanotis, and Mandevilla—all names of clinging jungle vines.

It took Blanc more than ten years to develop successful hydroponic techniques, which he has now copyrighted. In 1985 he found the ideal vertical planting medium, a matrix of synthetic fibers that can both retain water and liquid fertilizers and form pockets for plants. As roots extend throughout the acrylic fabric, it becomes even stronger. (A Blanc creation draped down a building wall, however, might weaken the structure if the wall has not been sealed against moisture.) The plants are watered and fertilized through a network of ducts, according to a precise timetable. Blanc claims that his vertical gardens

Blanc's designs burst from the face of the Fondation Cartier in Paris, right, and form the core of the experimental gardens at Vivendi Universal's retreat in the French countryside, below.



require ten times less water and fertilizer than would the same plants in the ground.

His own one-story house, a former industrial workshop in the Parisian suburb of Creteil, has planted walls on every available surface, outside and in. One living wall is home to five exotic birds; another hangs over an aquarium full of tropical fish. Each wall is planted with a different group of species that is adapted to its particular exposure. A kind of soft underwater light, constantly changing, shines through the greenery. Brilliant flowers bloom in spots, splashing the walls in patterns of color that differ from season to season.

The project for the Pershing Hall hotel, former home of the American Legion in Paris, took six months to complete. Blanc says his goal was to create "a forest atmosphere that makes people dream." Over four stories high, his vertical garden towers above café tables below, and is visible from the hotel rooms surrounding the courtyard. Three hundred species, organized in drifts, have been set in pockets in Blanc's synthetic turf. Grasses—colorful carex, stipa, luzula—mix with perennials such as euphorbia, fuchsia, campanula, saxifrage, and heuchera. All of these cluster around surprising exotics like the Mexican succulent *Beschorneria yuccoides*. The result is stunningly beautiful.

Lately, many garden designers have begun to imitate Blanc's living walls. But few can match his knowledge of the precise conditions that allow each plant in his garden tapestries to flourish. And fewer still have his abiding love for those lovely ladies "Muehlenbeckia, Agalmyla, Tecomaria, Aristolochia." □

Louisa Jones is a gardening writer based in France. Her books include Provence: A Country Almanac (Stewart, Tabori & Chang).

