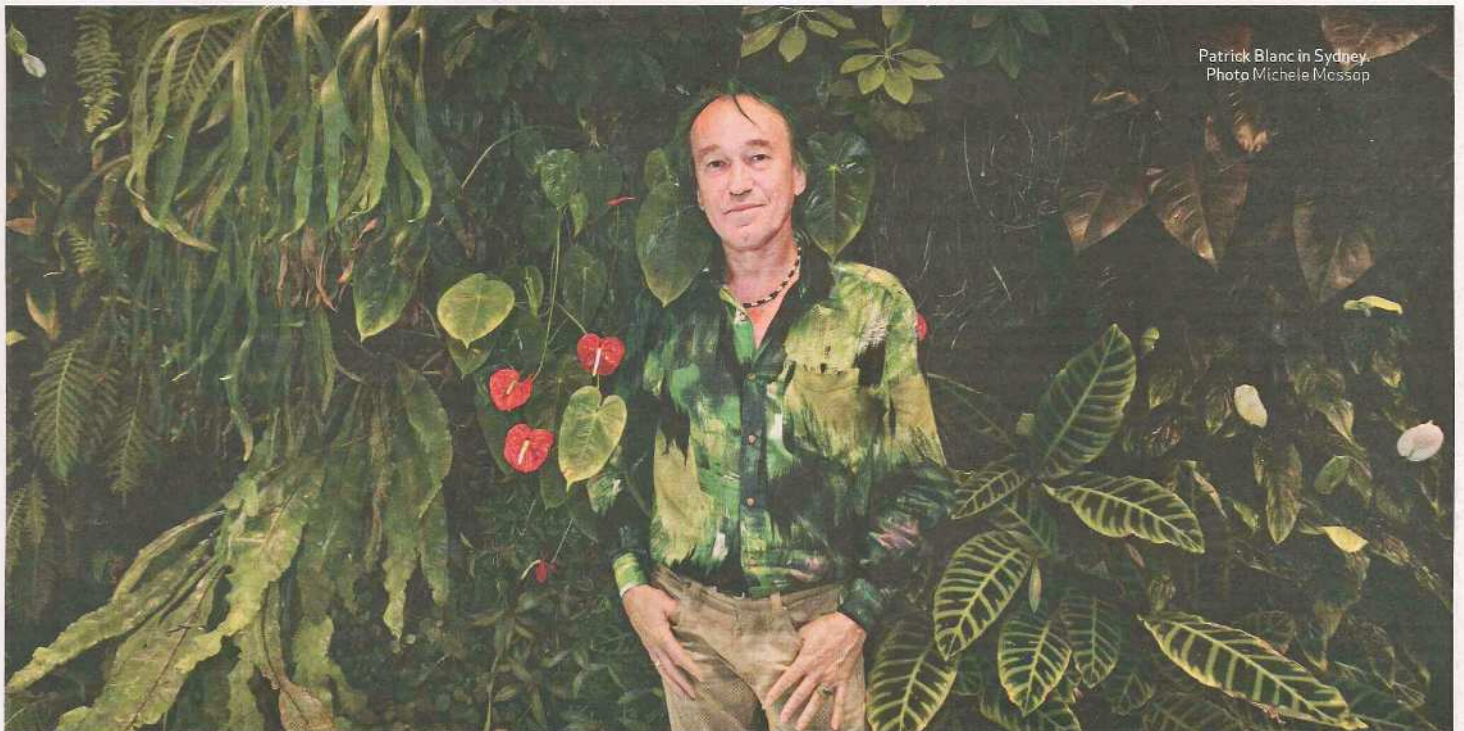


Landscape

Patrick Blanc in Sydney.
Photo Michele Messop

From little things big things grow

Patrick Blanc has turned the vertical garden from a childhood obsession into a global phenomenon.

Will Glasgow

Patrick Blanc is about to board a swing-stage scaffold. But first, he must put on a white hard hat, clear safety goggles and a yellow vest. Blanc, 59, is disappointed by the palette.

"Do you have in green?" he asks, hopefully, of the safety official. They don't. "Terrible," he mutters.

He doesn't think they will suit his outfit: a Joe Bananas green patterned silk shirt, earthy skinny jeans and mossy leather shoes. His wispy hair is a shocking bright green, more nightclub than forest.

Perhaps he could wear his own glasses, he suggests, pulling out a bright green plastic pair from his shirt pocket. The official agrees. "I think it is much better," Blanc says. And off he goes in high spirits.

Blanc is in Sydney to check on the progress of one of his most ambitious works: 1120 square metres of vertical garden – made up of more than 200 native species and another 150 exotics – which will hang from the side of the \$2 billion, Jean Nouvel-designed, One Central Park residential and retail complex in Chippendale, Sydney, just over the road from the University of Technology's brutalist tower.

From Paris to Manhattan to Bangkok, the vertical garden, or plant wall, has become all the rage. They hang on the sides of museums, on the walls of boutique stores, on the facades of towers. They have even sprouted in our airport lounges.

Many are the work of Patrick Blanc; many more are the work of those he has inspired. Blanc, who says he doesn't like gardens – he prefers nightclubs and rainforests – is now one of the heroes of the gardening world. A Frenchman who rejects the formal French gardening

tradition; a botanist who thinks like a painter; an artist who still works as a research scientist; a man who has dyed his hair green for 27 years – he is, to use his favourite term of praise, an "interesting" figure.

As a 12-year-old boy he turned his bedroom in his parents' apartment in Suresnes, an outer suburb of Paris, into a green room. Plants lined his walls and filled his desk.

"It was not so easy to water," Blanc recalls. His initial interest in vertical gardens was simply a way to fit more plant species into his congested room.

His epiphany: "I did suddenly discover that I could put many more plants vertically than horizontally."

He experimented and tinkered to create a system that would allow him to grow a wall of plants on a surface without soil. By the time he was 19 – now at university studying botany – he had arrived at the model he would later export around the world: a metal frame, a one centimetre thick sheet of PVC, covered in two thin layers of non-biodegradable felt, with pockets for the plants to sit within, and water and nutrients seeping from top to bottom.

"Light, structure and knowledge of the plants. It's simply this, nothing else."

At the end of his second year at university an enthusiastic Blanc set off to the tropical rainforests of Malaysia and Thailand. There – seeing the sides of trees and the faces of rocks – he had a second epiphany. "I did see that my idea was simply a copy of nature."

At the heart of the French gardening tradition is the mastery of nature. Where the English gardening tradition is characterised by a naturalist style, the French tradition is one of total domination of the natural world. It does not hide its



Artist Henri Rousseau had a passion for tropical plants, above. Blanc's work at Musée du Quai Branly, below.



In his obsession with tropical rainforests, he is an heir to Rousseau.

artifice; it celebrates it. Blanc is not a fan of either.

When he was a young boy his mother took him to the enormous, regimented gardens of Versailles, which functioned as a symbol of the House of Bourbon's authority. "I didn't like it too much," he says, sounding disgusted at the memory.

"Me, what I do, is not contact. It is imagination. When you see my vertical garden you think of a

cascade of a waterfall. You think of a cliff, covered in moss. You think of another place. It's totally different ... in your imagination you are travelling, dreaming of another kind of world."

In his obsession with tropical rainforests and the huge variety of leaves that grow in them, he is in some ways the heir of the French post-impressionist painter Henri Rousseau.

"There is a high diversity in the shapes of the architecture of the plants [Rousseau] did paint. This is the thing which is similar." But there is a key difference. Rousseau famously never went near a rainforest; his paintings drew on the specimens he had seen in the glass houses in Paris. Blanc, in contrast, is a frequent visitor to the rainforests of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Brazil. He continues to work as a research scientist at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. He would like his works to be accompanied with a free booklet, explaining which plant is which. "I think it is very important for education."

Vertical gardens have become almost commonplace in the past five years. It is now Blanc who is followed rather than nature. Stuart Tyler, one of the management team of Fyotogreen, Australia's largest vertical gardener, and the team behind the vertical garden at the 1 Blich Street tower in Sydney, says Blanc's influence has been enormous.

"He inspired us to get into this," Tyler says. He cites Blanc's work on Paris's Musée du Quai Branly, also designed by Jean Nouvel, and opened in 2006, as particularly significant.

"He opened people's eyes to the possibilities of what could be achieved," says Richard Unsworth, the owner of the Redfern garden shop The Garden Life. Unsworth and his team have designed numerous

bespoke vertical gardens for customers around Sydney. But he says the off-the-shelf options are a more common, much cheaper request. Even Bunnings has a line.

Blanc says he is flattered by the imitation. "I did create something."

While there is a consensus on his supremacy as an artist, some of his imitators criticise his method. Tyler says his thin felt system is too thirsty for Australia's dry climate.

This criticism is tempered at One Central Park as the garden will use recycled water. There has been debate too over his status as the inventor of the vertical garden. An academic at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Richard Hindle, published a paper earlier this year that demonstrated a mid-west professor Stanley White – brother of the American writer EB White – had created a modern version of the vertical garden in the 1930s. The system is quite different to Blanc's, using a series of "botanical bricks".

Blanc is not concerned about being credited as its inventor, saying the idea is as old as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon of the Ancient World. "The problem is not to know who was the first. The problem is to know who first did the work in the towns of the world," he says.

Undoubtedly, that person is Blanc.

Back on the ground after inspecting the One Central Park project, Blanc has shed his vest and hat. He says the vertical garden is coming along well and in six months it will be close to the garden he has painted in his head. He did find one mistake on his 1120 square metre canvas. On one of the panels, two species – both purple – that should have been separated by three metres were planted too close together. "Suddenly I did see that they were separated by only 50 centimetres!" he exclaims.

But now spotted, it will soon be fixed. "I am happy."