



Climbing the wall: Patrick Blanc's vertical garden in Broadway - the world's highest. Photo: Sahlan Hayes

Greening of the upwardly mobile

Georgina Mitchell

A French botanist has spent his life coaxing plants to grow up walls. Patrick Blanc is the award-winning designer of the vertical garden, which displays plants in urban areas around the world using synthetic moss instead of soil.

His latest, and biggest project is the Broadway development One Central Park, where he was commissioned to design the tallest vertical garden in the world, covering 1000 square metres over 40 panels.

It uses a variety of plants, including some inspired by Blanc's love of the Blue Mountains, which are drip-fed by recycled nutrient-rich water.

Blanc has worked since the 1980s to perfect the vertical garden, but he first became interested in botany when he used plants in his fish tank at 12-years-old.

"To extract all the excess nutrients, especially all the nitrogen, it was good to have the plants above the water but the roots inside the water," he said. "So it began as kind of biological filter above my aquarium."

Since then, he has been inspired by plants from Asia, Australia and North America, which he incorporates into his designs. The diverse range of plants deters pests, who typically target just one species, and also allows the garden to flower at different times of year.

"To do a vertical garden is actually technically quite simple," Blanc said.

"In this case, the challenge is it's very high, and very high means very windy. So it's important plants are not falling onto people in the street."

To stop this botanical rainfall, the plants are surrounded by a grid, which will be obscured once they begin to grow and their roots entwine into a bed of synthetic mesh several millimetres thick.

Blanc was next on his way to explore Kakadu National Park, where he hoped to find interesting new species of plants to use in future designs.

After giving talks at the Australian Garden Show Sydney on September 5 and 6, he will oversee plant projects including a museum near the beach in Miami and an arid undertaking in the 55 degree heat of Baja in California.

Upkeep of the living sculptures is minimal. The plants need minor maintenance, just pruning three times a year, but apart from that the only way the innovation can fail is if someone "switches off the water".

And as for questions of longevity, Blanc says he has had the same vertical garden in his home since 1982.

"What I can say is that my vertical gardens, and the way I do them, can last for at least 31 years," he said. "I can't say more than that."