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Growing vertical and green

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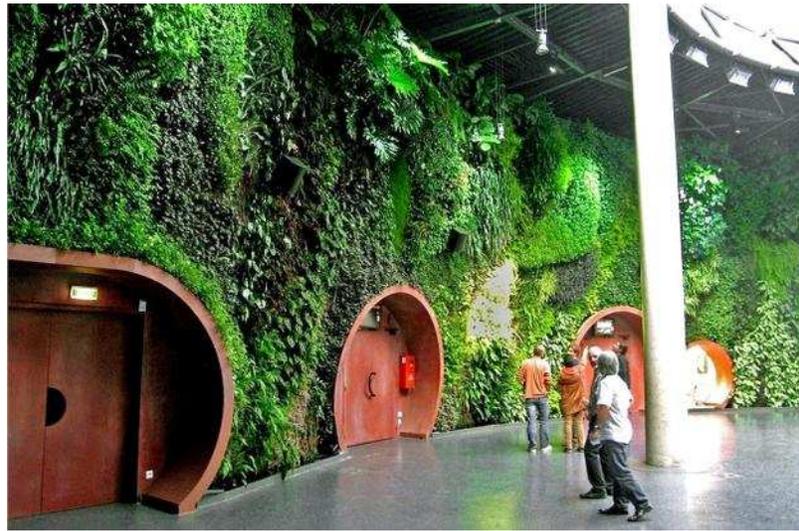


French botanist and creator of Greenwall (vertical garden) Patrick Blanc. Photo:Thulasi Kakkat

The Hindu



Special arrangement



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French botanist Patrick Blanc, a pioneer of the vertical garden, is gearing up to give the city its first green wonder

When French botanist Patrick Blanc created the first vertical garden in Paris in 1978, a newspaper headline screamed about the novelty- Ferns from the Ceiling. The excitement of tropical plants thriving on a wall in Patrick's father's room was so breathtaking that Patrick's handiwork almost immediately shot him to fame. Today he is acknowledged as the pioneer in this genre of botany and landscaping. His works are showcased at some of the most prominent sites in cities across the world. Patrick will be giving, if all goes as planned, the city its first vertical garden at Veli in Fort Kochi. Presently he is preparing the ground to put up, Green Kiss or Standing Hortus, working titles of the project, in December, as part of the second edition of the Kochi Muziris Biennale. An authority on tropical plants Patrick came to India following the tunes of his friend Pascal Heni, a singer who loves to sing Hindi songs. "Pascal of Bollywood, as he is nicknamed brought me to India. I got the opportunity then to discover the forests here," he said recalling his trips to the jungles of Assam, Meghalaya and the Western Ghats.

Kerala's bio-diversity being a delight to any botanist was so also for Patrick on his first trip. He was thrilled to discover the shola forests in the Western Ghats. But this time round he is dismayed at the lack of native origin plants in the clutch of nurseries he visited in and around Thrissur. "I found that there is a dearth of plants of native origin. There are only exotic plants here," he said pointing to the gaudy orchids, luscious palms and the serrated ferns. "It is important to showcase plants from here. I saw many interesting plants but not a single native of Kerala."

Patrick finds this ironical as the first tome on tropical plants the *Hortus Malabaricus* (Garden Of Malabar, 1678-93) originated here.

"As a scientist I work on the adaptation of plants to the shade of tropical rain forest," said Patrick and it is this that determines his choice of plants for his gardens placed at different elevations and in different environs.

One of his most challenging works has been an 800sq metre garden in a car park in Lyons in South of France. The garden has been a great success and patrons find a distinct change in odour and air quality in the car park especially towards the garden area. "It is no more a place where people don't like to go," he said with pride. His other notable and demanding works are in a high rise building in Sydney, where he worked along with famous architect Jean Nouvel and in Miami where he covered 70 columns around a museum by the sea. "I had to take into consideration the salty sea spray the plants would face constantly," he says.

Another of his challenging projects that is underway is in Riyadh where he is putting up a garden for an 1800 sq ft conference centre. Here the plants have to withstand temperatures that go up to 50-60 degree centigrade.

The Kochi project for Patrick is more emotional than challenging. His prime aim would be to make the garden a link between the prestigious *Hortus Malabaricus* and contemporary botany. "It will be homage to Hendrik van Rheede, the Dutch Governor and the physicians who made the book possible."

Patrick's another work nearing completion has strangely again a Kerala link. He is working on observations of *Thottea*, a species from Kerala and on *Begonia* from Palawan in Philippines. This will be out shortly.

As a 12-year-old it was the fascination at the adaptability of the leaves of cryptocoryne or Water Trumpet, an aquatic plant that lured him into the study of botany. France of the 60s was importing these plants from SE Asia, and their leaves adapted themselves differently when in water. Even now the water trumpet holds the same wonder as Patrick has made several attempts to see a patch in Singapore in bloom but has not been lucky so far

“Yes, much like the Neelakurunji, which blooms once in 12 years. I will definitely use some species of the Neelkurunji in the vertical garden here,” said Patrick.

The Veli experiment

The conceptualised vertical garden at Veli will be a 5-m-high and 60-m-long green curtain. It will have plants on either side of a maintaining structure of beams covered with 3mm plastic sheets, and layered over by felt made from recycled cloth. The felt will be imported as Patrick wishes to use a tried and tested material. “In my old vertical gardens, 30 year old ones, you can see the roots through the felt,” said Patrick. The watering and manuring will be done through a worked in irrigation system. Some of the native plants that he proposes to use are- Vanda, Drynaria, Vittaria and Pyrrosia. Some of the exotic ones will be- Ixora, Wrightia, Ruellia and Anthuriums. The long term maintenance and management of the project is yet to be finalised.

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