

## **A private Eden in Paris: vertical gardens creator Patrick Blanc**

Adam Thomson

The French botanist shares his home in the suburbs with lizards, frogs, birds, a room-sized aquarium — and 268 plant species



Patrick Blanc, whose vertical gardens adorn the façades of hotels, shopping centres, museums and office buildings the world over



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Office area where the house and garden merge inside Blanc's home in a Paris suburb



- Exotic birds perch on a branch



- Backless sofa covered in scatter cushions opposite the kitchen, and a vintage poster advertising the 1943 film *Le Foyer Perdu*



- Lizards have free run of the garden



- Bookshelves and the aquarium



- Space used by Blanc's partner, Pascal Héni (better known in India as the singer Pascal of Bollywood)



- A poster promoting a series of concerts that Edith Piaf gave in Paris in the early 1960s



- Garden chairs and artworks inside the main entrance to the house



- Stairs leading to the bedroom and bathroom



- Velvet-like plant that grows directly on the wall of Blanc's vertical garden



- Personal items and artefacts



- Greenhouse in the basement of the house, home to some of the plants Blanc learnt about during his global plant-hunting trips



- Outside Blanc's bathroom

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If you did not know what was inside the house of the French botanist Patrick Blanc, you would probably describe the two-storey structure on the south-eastern fringes of Paris as yet another unremarkable example of urban sprawl.

The stuccoed exterior is in need of attention; the paintwork is faded and peeling, and dirty shutters are rolled down tight over the five windows that face the street.

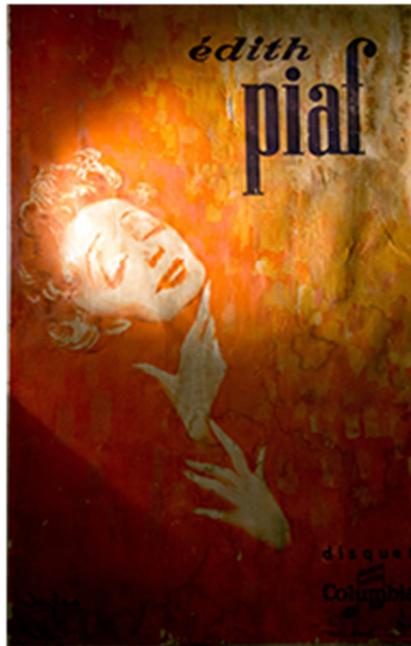
Yet this picture of abandon and neglect — the front door is missing a pane of glass and an electric cable sags over the entrance — hides what Blanc aptly describes as his own little Eden.

The main space combines a sitting room, office, dining room and kitchen, and its centrepiece is a dazzling vertical garden — the concept that over the past three decades has helped project Blanc's reputation beyond academia into the realms of architecture, design and even contemporary art.

Blanc's creations adorn the façades of hotels, shopping centres, museums and office buildings the world over. One of his latest, at One Central Park in Sydney, made headlines as the world's tallest vertical garden when it was inaugurated last year.

Measuring about 75 sq metres, Blanc's private vertical garden is a little smaller than the Sydney landmark. Yet it still packs a staggering 268 carefully selected species, many of which he learnt about on his global plant-hunting trips. The green wall is also home to dozens of exotic lizards, frogs and birds, which scamper, jump and fly about almost as freely as if they were in a tropical forest.

### **Favourite thing**



Blanc struggles to decide on his favourite object. A particular plant tempts him. But he ends up opting for a vintage poster promoting a series of concerts that Edith Piaf gave in Paris in the early 1960s.

When he was about nine, Blanc's father took him to watch Piaf perform. "I must be the youngest person alive today who has seen her," he says.

The poster is an original, and he has glued the ageing paper to a piece of canvas to protect it. For years, it hung in Lebanon House, one of several dozen residences for students at Paris's Cité Internationale Universitaire. Staff began to notice how Blanc admired it every time he visited. "Finally, they gave it to me."

To complete the feeling of a small natural paradise, aerial roots from vines hang like a curtain in the centre of the room, while the glass floor of his spacious office area covers an aquarium with fish and aquatic plants.

"It has always been my dream to be in close proximity to a huge aquarium," he says. "As soon as we saw the place, we said, 'Perfect, the aquarium goes there'."

Blanc's passion for animals and plants grew from two seminal moments in his childhood. The first, when he was about eight, came when the caretaker of the Paris building he lived in with his parents gave him some fish from her aquarium, which gave birth to live young rather than laying eggs.

"When you are a child, to see a fish do that is incredible," he says.

The second occurred a year later when his mother took him to an international plant exhibition, where he first discovered orchids. "It was miraculous to see these plants growing on the trunks of trees without any roots," he recalls.

His religious upbringing conjured thoughts of the Garden of Eden. “When I saw those plants, it was like the time before Eve ate the apple,” he says of his visit to the exhibition. “Everything in the Garden of Eden was beautiful and good to eat. You didn’t have to cultivate the plants. You didn’t have to battle against the weeds. All the plants were totally given to you.”

In some ways, Blanc’s vertical gardens are an attempt to recreate that idea of self-sustaining harmony. “What I love about the vertical garden is that it basically looks after itself. Not everything is good to eat,” he says, looking up at the leaves sprouting from his office wall. “But at least everything is beautiful.”

It would be easy to take the 62-year-old Blanc as an eccentric. His long hair has green highlights — he first dyed it in 1985. His nails, which extend more than an inch beyond his fingertips, look like the talons of an eagle (he says they are great for snipping leaves). On this particular day, he is wearing flip-flops and a Hawaiian shirt with bamboo motifs.

Yet everything about the engaging Blanc is remarkably consistent and motivated by his core passion for plants and nature. Even his approach to interior design takes its inspiration from his academic work, which focuses on plants’ flexibility — in particular, how they adapt to, rather than change, the environment that surrounds them.

In the basement of the house, a room is dedicated as a greenhouse where Blanc collects different kinds of plants from his travels

Beyond the aquarium floor, he and his musician partner Pascal Héni (better known in India as the singer Pascal of Bollywood) have left the house they bought in 2008 virtually untouched. The main room has four white pillars supporting the upper floor, and a raised concrete platform on the left, on which Blanc houses his library — titles include *Trees of Delhi*, *The Ferns of Florida* and *Perspectives on Plant Competition*.

Blanc has placed a long backless sofa covered in exotic scatter cushions on the lower level of this room, opposite the kitchen. On the peeling white wall behind it, a vintage poster advertises *Le Foyer Perdu*, a 1943 film starring the Swedish singer Zarah Leander. Shelves are lined with Edith Piaf CDs, myriad ornaments and photographs, and an old Carl Zeiss microscope. One bookshelf is crammed with maps and well-thumbed travel guides to far-off destinations.

On the upper level, the couple’s bedroom verges on the ascetic: two simple wooden side tables flank a low bed under the large beams of the roof, which are painted white to match the spartan walls. Overlooking a central courtyard, which has the appearance of a transplanted tropical rainforest, is a balcony with an outdoor shower.

Throughout, the property still has polished and often highly decorative cement floors — a legacy of the previous owners, who used it as a factory for their flooring business. “We didn’t want to change the space. We wanted to adapt to it like in nature,” says Blanc. “When a seed germinates, it has to deal with its environment. As a scientist, I love the idea of adapting to space.”

Blanc’s pioneering work with vertical gardens has many imitators, and he says that the quality of vertical gardens has improved over the years. Yet not all of them are successful — a fact

that he attributes to a lack of scientific knowledge. “Thousands of people are doing vertical gardens but not a single one of them is a scientist or a botanist.”

One of the common problems, he argues, is that plants are chosen that are unsuitable for growing on a vertical plane. Another is to have too few species, which leaves the wall vulnerable.

“If you have very few species, insects and fungus are very happy because they have a lot of easy work,” he says. “I use so many different species, partly for aesthetic reasons but mainly to avoid those problems.”

Yet the botanist plays down the effort that goes into making his creations. “It’s very quick work, a question of hours,” he says. “When I have a project, I only spend one or two days in meetings. Then I take a week or two to go to the forests to do my academic work.”

Blanc welcomes the increasing popularity of vertical gardens, which he says create jobs and help to reintroduce nature into people’s predominantly urban lives. But there is no overtly political or environmental message in his work, he adds.

“I realise that what I was doing could have an interest for a lot of people but I love the plants too much to think of them simply as purifying the air. They are what drive me.”

## **Going green**

Blanc uses a synthetic felt made from polyamides for the basis of his vertical gardens. Unlike cotton or wool, it takes hundreds of years to break down.

Its structure allows water, collected from the rooftop and recycled, to pass quickly through the felt. Plant roots can grow through it and micro-organisms live in it.

The result, says Blanc, is a light structure that can go higher and cover more surface area than conventional materials, and also requires only one-tenth of the amount of nutrients compared with the volumes used in traditional horticulture.

*Photographs: Magali Corouge*