

THE VERTICAL GARDEN: From Nature to the City. By Patrick Blanc (W.W. Norton, New York, 2012) 208 pp; illus. \$65.

Patrick Blanc is the man of the moment for those who crave a 'vertical garden', or *mur végétal*, as it is known in France. A botanist and artist, Blanc has been compared to a modern-day Henri Rousseau for his incomparable green compositions which capitalise on the basic fact that plants naturally grow upwards in order to follow the path to available light. Rivers of greenery in all shapes, textures, and hues clothe walls and other surfaces like a rich three-dimensional painting. His compositions remind us of a forest understorey, but they fill vertical surfaces rather than horizontal ground.

This lavish book, an updated and expanded version of an earlier edition, celebrates walls of green on otherwise mundane structures, such as parking garages, apartment buildings, schools, and museums. From Paris to New Delhi, Sao Paulo, New York, and Singapore, the author coaxes nature to furnish walls in lush greenery. In London, his work can be found at the Athenaeum Hotel in Piccadilly and the Driver Pub in Kings Cross, as well as the Sky Team Lounge at Heathrow Airport. In the US, Blanc has works in progress at the Miami Art Museum and the Phoenix Botanical Garden.

The secret to Blanc's popularity is his thorough knowledge of plants and their habits as well as the complex engineering system that he has devised for display and watering that is applied to the walls, known as irrigation matting. Dubbed the 'green man', Blanc brings to his art an encyclopedic knowledge of tropical plants based on his frequent travels to the Amazon, the Canary Islands, and elsewhere as well as his work as a research scientist. The clinging and draping nature of certain plants combined with his love of waterfalls and seeping rocks, gave him the idea for vertical gardening.

His creations are breathtaking when they are installed in the right location, but a disaster if their intensive maintenance is allowed to lapse. On a recent trip to Paris, I admired his spectacular

installation at Jean Nouvel's Musée Quai Branly and the BHV Homme Boutique in the Marais. Equally intriguing was the installation at Club Med, glimpsed through the windows on Avenue Pierre Charron. The big disappointment was the much-touted walkway along the Rue d'Alsace that links the Gare de l'Est to the Gare du Nord, where the many dry patches created a visual eyesore.

While his book gives information about his theories and inspirations, the nuts and bolts of how to install and maintain a vertical garden can be found in a companion volume by his colleague, Noémie Vialard, entitled *Gardening Vertically: 24 Ideas for Creating Your Own Green Walls* (W. W. Norton, 2012). Blanc writes, 'She's written the book that invites us all to look upward and admire plants [so] put down your spades and rakes . . . and get out your drills and staplers.' Vialard provides clear instructions on how to assemble striking combinations of plants and construct the necessary framework to encourage climbing and clinging. In addition to using traditional roses and vines, Vialard demonstrates how to mingle mosses, aromatic herbs, ferns and succulents to cover even the smallest wall. She also shows how to build the supporting wall that includes wooden battens, a PVC panel, layers of irrigation matting (or horticultural felt), irrigation pipes and planting slots in the matting.

A search for ideal plants begins after the framework has been mastered. According to Vialard, the best plants are those that like having their feet in the shade as well as those that like a well-drained soil. Her preferred choices are lilyturf (liriope), hardy begonias, corydalis, hostas, astilbes, asters, saxifrages, bleeding hearts (*dicentra*), wild strawberries, irises and rock roses. We even spotted full-grown *Bergenia cordifolia* happily growing on one wall. There's something to be said for the simple act of staging a series of containers for plant displays, rather than the fuss and muss of constructing an elaborate, well-drained wall, but after having seen several of Blanc's incredible installations, one hankers to give his concept a try on that odd wall in the garden.

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