

The indoor garden wall Patrick Blanc created for his friends the Dimanches is so lush, it's almost as if someone has plopped an easy chair down in the middle of the forest.

Garden Apartment

Botanist Patrick Blanc has been bringing the wilds of the rainforests to Parisian walls for over 30 years, most recently at the Jean Nouvel–designed Quai Branly museum. One lucky family, however, doesn't have to go any farther than their living room to take in the wonders of Blanc's vertical gardens. Oh how jealous Henri Rousseau would be!



The Dimanches (above) relax in their exotic living room cum garden. Having lived in the country for many years, the family was eager to bring nature into every room of their city home (right).

A man who has lived among plants for 30 years is expected to have a green thumb. But Patrick Blanc has opted for the pinkie instead, with a disturbingly long nail slicked over in glittering emerald polish. He is a radiant evergreen, bedecked in Peter Pantone snakeskin shoes, khaki safari trousers, and a lime disco shirt, with mesclun highlights in his blond hair. Even his vice is green: He smokes menthols. Frankly, it wouldn't take a genius to pick the botanist out of a lineup.

Getting your hands on him is another matter entirely. The creator of the “plant wall,” a living canvas for indoor and outdoor vertical space, is in high demand. His trademark technique for a top-down, no-fuss, no-muss irrigation system, not to mention the 30 years of botanical research on three continents under his belt, have made him an urban garden guru. Recent creations include the hip Pershing Hall hotel and the Fondation Cartier in Paris, the swanky Siam Paragon mall in Bangkok, boutiques in New York and Paris, and restaurants in Los



Angeles and beyond. With the lavish opening of the Jean Nouvel–designed Musée du Quai Branly in Paris in June, where he created a lush, 8,600-square-foot façade with 15,000 plants, big-scale commissions are flooding in.

Blanc's work began, however, with homes—notably his own, a tropical rainforest doubling as an apartment on the outskirts of Paris, in Créteil. Even as major jobs began to elbow out most private commissions, some homeowners managed to persuade Blanc to create outdoor vertical gardens, seeking to add a “rural” element to their city views. The indoor vertical garden—Blanc's true calling as a low-light specialist—however, had to wait until 2004, when Jean-Marc Dimanche phoned up from his 4,400-square-foot home, which was under construction in the Left Bank's 14th arrondissement, with an idea for the 20-by-23-foot interior wall that was beginning to take shape.

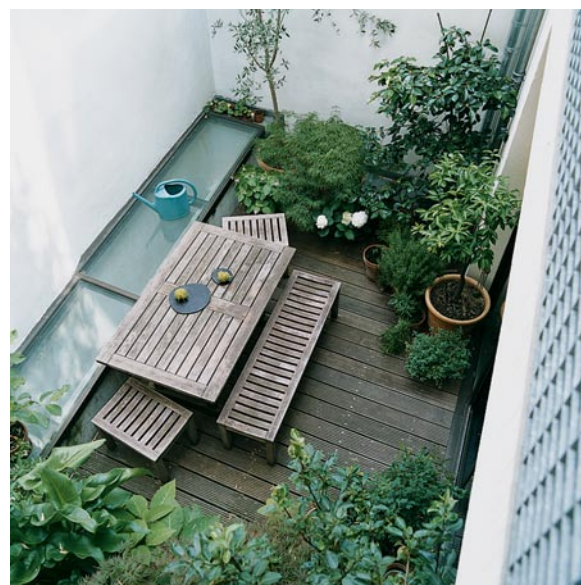
“I told him I'd found the perfect spot, and he said, ‘Fantastic! I've finally found a loon like you crazy enough ▶



The Dimanches' indoor garden wall is 20 by 23 feet, dominating the living room in the best possible way (above). Light floods the whole house as well as the courtyard, with its more standard garden (right).

to put the wall inside his house!" Dimanche remembers. The adventure had begun. Two years on, it is hard to imagine the space without its forest canopy, a canvas of the living with some 150 tropical, low-light species assembled in harmony. It begins as a field of texture near the ground, then runs through violet and amber arcs of flowers and other ruddy blooms, broadening out near the ceiling into trees that overhang the room like a sheltering forest. It strikes an easy balance with both the raw elements of the home (concrete, metal beams, a transparent glass elevator that pierces the heart of the five-story structure) and the charming bric-a-brac of a family's everyday existence (country-kitchen stools, orchids coaxed into bloom, battered leather armchairs that sigh beneath your weight). The effect, Dimanche agrees, is "very calming."

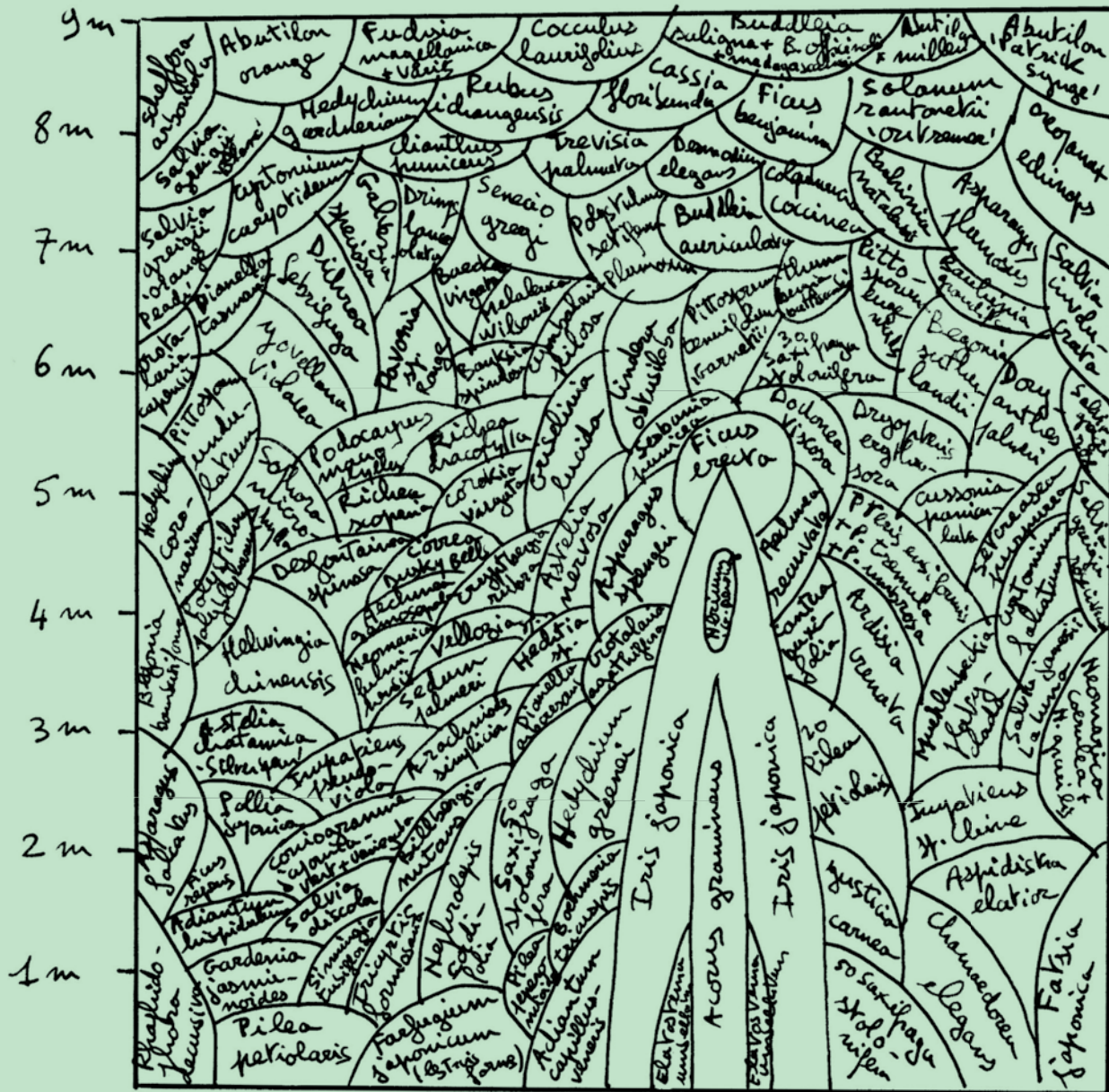
Though he always kept a flat in Paris to be close to the communications agency he runs, his wife, Vivette, and their children moved from outside Rambouillet,



an hour's drive from the city, where they had renovated a *longère*, an ancient, low-lying elongated house nestled into a garden. "Basically, when we moved our house shifted 90 degrees, and so did the garden," Dimanche says. "This house, for us, has meant a whole new life, a new lifestyle," adds Vivette. "It's not a purely conceptual house. It's all about *le vivant, le vécu*," she explains, the living, the lived experience.

For all its urban delights, Paris is one of the densest world capitals—two million residents packed into only 40 square miles—and it just cries out for a green manifesto. Blanc's plant walls may be part of that, producing spaces that don't deny the urban grid but weave it into the realm of the living. From homes and museums Blanc now wants to move on to the city's least attractive spots—parking lots, public housing, train stations, "all those places where we don't expect living things." "The plant wall is not a criticism of the city," he adds. "I'm only trying to reconcile it with nature." ►

The vertical garden wall is so lush and alluring that it's tempting to try to grow one yourself at home. But Blanc's elaborate plans outlining the Dimanches' living room addition may quell that desire.



Not Just Another Plant in the Wall

"Technically it's a cinch," Patrick Blanc says, and with a wave of the hand ticks off the ingredients needed to build a plant wall: ten-millimeter-thick waterproof PVC slabs covered with a polyamid felt, into which holes are cut for the plants; a small hose, punctured every ten centimeters by a two-millimeter hole, to run the length of the top of the wall; a timing device to ensure regular, light watering—like a trickle slowly wending its way down a mossy rock.

The ensemble is then attached to a metal structure that stands out from a supporting wall, trapping a cushion of air, which acts as insulation. Outdoor walls take small plants

and seedlings straight from the nursery, while fully mature plants are used indoors. A plant wall by Blanc is made to last at least 30 years with only minimal maintenance.

Beyond the bare guts and skeleton, however, the wall requires an expert eye to choose the flora and lay it out in harmony with light, climate, and the built environment. At the Dimanche house, Blanc took into account that the wall would be contemplated from different perspectives—from a mezzanine at eye's length with the ceiling, the staircase below, the street beyond, and the room itself. The family wanted a forest canopy feel but without any bushy branches

that would diminish the room, and they wanted a variety of blooms all year long but without floral overload. Blanc, drawing on an intimate knowledge of sequencing of plants in natural environments, drew up a "tapestry" that mapped out the 150 species, mostly low-light tropical and subtropical varieties available in commercial nurseries. Gardeners brought the plan to life by weaving the plants into the felt and allowing them to take a shallow hold. Once the PVC was mounted, it was merely a question of time—a few months, in this case—for the plants to expand across the wall, creating a patchwork of texture and tone in constant evolution. —M.H. ■