

## Alban Muller: Growing Tomorrow's Cosmetics in the Botanical Garden



Alban Muller heads the gardens, and has loads of gardening ideas in his head. In his firm dealing in raw materials for cosmetics, in Cosmetic Valley, the business competence cluster he presides, in the ideas he cultivates and disseminates as in his experimental Herboretum in Saint-Ay where he played host to journalists from the *Observatoire des Cosmétiques* website... A host of thoughts and initiatives, like tiny seeds he hopes will blossom in the future: (true) nature and biodiversity.

"I happened on the natural ingredients sector completely by chance," recounts Alban Muller. He was indeed "exposed", as he himself puts it, to nature from the earliest age. "My grandmother lived in the country", he explained. "She had a huge garden, with plantations and animals, where I roamed freely during the holidays. It was a formative experience."

He started with what he calls "serious" studies, with the equivalent of 6 A levels, in scientific subjects, to prepare for a top business school, and in philosophy, for which he sat the exams independently ("I was a dunce", he pointed out, "but I love challenges."), he turned to accounting and business administration.

"I found myself managing files, including some on plant extracts, raw materials for the cosmetics industry. I started selling them. But sometimes the quality was defective, or inconsistent, which was unsatisfactory. So I decided to make them myself, to see things right through." And that's where Nature made her comeback.

### Alban Muller's take on nature

"Nature is a complicated affair," he pointed out. "It is precariously balanced, and humankind has had much negative impact. We have acted as interfering ignoramuses, interpreting data wrong, based on pre-conceived ideas, without any end-to-end vision."

For example, do you like green lawns, like a beautiful carpet, no one blade taller than the next, soft to touch and pleasing to the eye? Did you know they contain only about five species of plants at most? Whereas a prairie that's every bit as green can boast up to 200 different species, offering far greater diversity of shelters for animals.

Here's another example. We don't like clover invading our carefully tended gardens or growing around our trees. And yet "clover draws nitrogen from the air into the soil" Alban Muller explained. "It's a great fertilising machine." What's more, it covers the soil, keeping it humid around the roots. Plus which, it attracts snakes, which eat the insects that are harmful to plants." Conclusion: a clover lawn around a tree reduces the need for fertiliser, water, insecticide and other treatments. In short, it's economic, ecological, powerful and natural. These are Alban Muller's watchwords. And in this example, he added: "However many leaves it has, it brings good luck!"



For he is of the opinion that Nature is neither magical nor irrational: "It's not because the weeping willow has its roots in water that it cures colds". No, Alban Muller asserts: "Nature is indeed a source of richness, but to harness it properly, you have to understand the whys and wherefores. You need to take a scientific approach to nature".



Scientific, to find out more about the world around us, also to analyse and leverage what nature has to offer to help us lead better lives while bearing in mind what we owe it: "Plants are essential to life" Alban Muller reiterated. "They produce our oxygen, form the basis of our food supply and boast endless applications. Hemp can also be used for paper, nettles are used in banknotes and so on! And we just have to preserve all that: Humankind is part of biodiversity, destroy nature and we destroy ourselves."

He says it like he thinks to anyone who's prepared to listen, but Alban Muller doesn't stop there. He has also put it into practice in his firm, day in day out, for a long time, and moreover has undertaken to prove it and show everyone.

### In his Herboretum garden

In 2004, he bought an old cloister surrounded by extensive grounds in the Loiret (in the Loire Valley), yet once he owned the place he did not use it as a country home. "This garden is not only for pleasure, it's for work. I wanted to make an educational garden to forge ties between people and nature," he explained.

He put together a team: two full-time gardeners, one manager and a communications officer to strike up partnerships, the aim being to create an experimental garden as an open-air example of the sheer power and resourcefulness of nature, as well as the point of safeguarding biodiversity.



Today, alongside the 10 tended hectares, a vast area is left to grow wild. Plants and animals are left alone, in order to observe the species, insects, birds, butterflies that thrive. "It is a wonderful example that often, the less you interfere with nature, the better things grow," commented Alban Muller. "We are also putting a message across in this garden. It's important to think about what you're doing before interfering with nature! And we all have to remember simple ways of helping to preserve biodiversity, like planting hedgerows as shelter for small animals or selecting local species which are well suited to the climate and thrive effortlessly."

The tended areas comprise ten gardens, each with a different theme, with plants selected according to use. There are small patches, set out in the manner of a French garden, such as the Flavour patch featuring long-forgotten vegetables, market vegetables, edible flowers and aromatic herbs, and the Temptations Garden with its luscious orchard brimming with apples, pears, grapes, kiwi fruit, plums and red fruit. And the neighbouring patch, the Well-being patch, has plants used in alternative medicine for restorative herbal teas or homeopathic remedies, while those grown for active ingredients in traditional and modern medicine are in the Healthcare patch. There's mauve, which can help cure coughs, arnica, tossa jute, fennel and sweet clover, known to help digestion.



And it's all designed with edutainment in mind: "You're allowed to touch, taste and smell," said Anne-Marie Bruckner, gardener and activity leader. Take a stroll through the Magic Spells garden, with its toxic plants: hemp of course, but also lily-of-the-valley. That's right! Did you know that you're better off admiring its leaves and berries than eating them?), castor bean and belladonna which can slow your heartbeat, which can be as dangerous in the hands of a homicidal herbalist as it is useful in the anaesthetist's syringe!

Not forgetting, of course, the owner's line of business, with a few patches for cosmetics ingredients: The Colours patch, for plants used in dyes for colouring, the Fragrance patch for those used in perfumes and of course the Beauty patch with borage, marigold, carrot, cucumber, raspberry and alchemilla, all nature's resources available for the compounders of products catering to our personal hygiene and skin, body and hair care.

But no visit would be complete without taking in the Regeneration Garden. It epitomises the spirit of the place and the power of its owner's sense of commitment. It features plants grown to serve humankind in filtering and de-pollution matters, those we can put to good use on roundabouts and derelict land. There are many types of grass which absorb pollutant particles and use them to generate their own energy, as well as irises and reeds which can regenerate and purify water, valuable in natural swimming ponds and around wastewater treatment plants, or industrial plants.

### In the business nursery

Alban Muller is not content with merely promoting eco-awareness: he applies the principles himself in his production units. He has "filtering gardens" around his plant to manage wastewater properly, but that's only the visible part of an entire set of measures implemented to preserve and nurture nature, including saving paper and water, improving waste management, optimising the carbon footprint in consumption of gas and electricity as well as in transport of goods and people and implementing manufacturing processes that are environmentally sound and save energy.

An approach that could be integrated seamlessly into organic cosmetics, and yet... "I take a global approach to environmental issues, aiming to keep negative impact of cosmetics and production on humankind and our environment to a minimum, without cutting ourselves off. Organic cosmetics take a rather sectarian approach".

He is soft-spoken, with clear blue eyes and careful body language, but Alban Muller can say it straight, and mean what he says. "This approach is restrictive in many respects and has suffered many setbacks. Should we work with palm oil on the basis that it has been organically farmed, when farming it contributes to deforestation and the extinction of orang-utans, not to mention the eco-footprint that shipping it entails, when we can grow flax here? Should we really ban pesticides when they are the only viable solution? It's like refusing an aspirin, even though it's the only effective remedy for your headache!"

A rather strange approach for somebody who claims to defend nature, but Alban Muller sets forth his argument, convincingly: "I'm not out to make a product that's natural at all costs. Incidentally, how do you define a "natural product"? Where's the cut-off point between "natural" and "artificial"? What's most important is the product's overall impact: What effect does it have? Is it a pollutant? Does it sting your eyes? How do you produce it? What types of extract are used? How toxic is it? How biodegradable is it? What about bioconcentration? This is all more important than promoting products that fail to convince consumers."

Because according to Alban Muller, there's another disadvantage to the "all-organic" approach: "An excessively radical approach prohibits a whole slew of ingredients and fragrances, prevents the development of wonderful formulae and the onset of a whole

new generation of products. It hampers progress. Organic cosmetics are rooted too firmly in a simplistic analysis, on criteria such as Good and Evil. Either you're perfect or you're rejected. However, nobody's perfect, and everyone has room for improvement."



Which words of wisdom open up a whole new sphere of action: "I play a creative role," claims Alban Muller, "offering skills and vision in the natural sector for all healthcare and beauty products." For he intends to spread the word of his vision to as many people as possible and the biggest groups: "They are the ones who impact the environment the most. Much more than a small organic lab developing a handful of creams on their own. So they're the ones we need to convince!" Whatever, Alban Muller has a garden for that too, in fact, a whole valley.

### In his Cosmetic Valley plantation

This business cluster in central France claims to be the top network worldwide in perfumes and cosmetics. It comes as no surprise that Alban Muller, president since 2005, also played a proactive role in drafting the eco-responsible Cosmetic Valley Charter. A charter signed by some cosmetic heavyweights such as Dior, Chanel, LVMH, Guerlain, Reckitt Benckiser (Veet, Intima, Biactol etc.), Expanscience (Mustela and Noviderm), to mention but a few, with various politicians in attendance!

"We have to persuade major groups to do better without putting a guilt trip on them. We have to ease them in gently. In Cosmetic Valley, we encourage firms to ask the right questions, especially in terms of fuel management."

And to achieve this, Alban Muller has a clincher: Ecology rhymes with profitability! "There are many elements which prove that eco-awareness is quite simply common sense. For example: Cosmetics are not just formulae, they are also products that need to be marketed. We can design them using organic materials rather than residue from oil refineries. We can also shed light on them using low-wattage bulbs. An experiment showed that it can cut electricity bills but also help save on air-conditioning in that these light bulbs generate less heat. Another consequence: Turning the air-conditioning down leads to fewer members of staff catching colds and thus fewer days taken for sick leave!" Conclusion: The eco-friendly approach is a win-win approach.

And to raise its profile, the eco-responsible Cosmetic Valley Charter plans to increase firm involvement, helping them scale new heights and promoting their achievements by awarding one to four "peonies" according to their level of commitment.

Which brings us to Alban Muller's second hobby horse: positive communication. "We have to persuade the public that we want to do things properly, rather than merely facing off attacks once they're upon us, as the cosmetics industry has done all too often. Because then it is too late. A Web rumour can be devastating, even when completely unfounded. This was the case with parabens. Of course we don't like having to use preservatives like



that, but there's too much market pressure: This is typical of the cosmetics industry's failure to communicate positively."

Alban Muller added that some major groups do make real, sizeable efforts in eco-responsibility, setting up highly developed policies, yet don't dare communicate on it or even mention it for fear of being accused of Green Washing! "We have to change our outlook," he concluded, "which is what we're doing in Cosmetic Valley".

Shaping mindsets, behaviour, encouraging firms to shoulder more responsibility begs the question: Does Alban Muller have the right profile (and inclination) for a political career? He smiles knowingly: "I have far more influence as a business leader than as a politician. And I'm free to act as I please."

### In his seeds for the future



When you take stock of Alban Muller's achievements, certain words spring to mind instinctively: "commitment", "vision", not to mention "self-possessed power and conviction rooted in authenticity". And he confirms these impressions when we ask about the shape of cosmetics to come.

"The industry will change, with firms becoming more specialised. The tide has already started to turn. Small and medium outfits are finding it ever harder to find all the skills required by technical improvement and regulations. And for the biggest, huge resources are required, and the result is a huge hotchpotch. However this may mean fewer products developed, but more polished, safer and involving less risk".

But for Alban Muller, the biggest and by far the most significant, is at another level. "Cosmetics will be going ethical," he asserts. "We have moved on from the hunter-gatherer era, we can't just draw on resources, we have to address farming, with more sharing, a more moral market, that the public wants and is ready to pay for. Technically speaking, it will also be a matter of incorporating more natural substances into products, with greener, softer chemicals.

And propounding his convictions: "Our species is a winner. We dominate earth, but too heavily, with highly negative consequences. We've reached our limit. In the past century, the world population has multiplied by four, yet the surface of the globe is the same. Consumption has multiplied by 10, but in ten years' time, a third of the population won't have access to clean water. We have to compensate, fast: We are running out of reserves. Why continue to concentrate our development on a resource (oil) which is due to run out in 30 years' time? Our survival hinges solely on bearing the environment in mind. Otherwise humankind will be history. Environmental pressure is growing: Whether we like it or not, the industry has to factor this in, or we'll all be asphyxiated by our own pollution".

As far as Alban Muller is concerned, this is no radical outlook, it's just plain obvious.