

FRONTLINES



Biologist Wolfgang inspects one of his corporate tropical glades

GROWING CONCERNS

THE SECRET LIFE OF LOBBIES

VERITIES

"Training is everything.

The peach was once a bitter almond, cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education"

— MARK TWAIN

Wolfgang Amelung is in the midst of a somewhat lofty discussion of man's place in nature when a hummingbird darts past. The tiny beast hovers over a nearby aquarium and then drops into the water for a split-second bath. Wolfgang smiles. When you've got the oddest office in Canada, crammed with tropical plants, aquariums and 10 small birds, you have to expect distractions like that. And if Wolfgang has his way, a lot more office workers will one day enjoy similar diversions—if only in the lobby.

The idea of brightening up a reception area or filling an atrium with tropical plants isn't new. But Wolfgang a biologist, is taking the concept several steps further. His firm, Genetron Systems Inc., offers complete ecosystems whose plants, fish, frogs and other creatures supply most of each other's nutrient needs, reducing maintenance. Anything less, Wolfgang insists, is just a façade. "They might as well use plastic plants. At least they wouldn't be dying."

Genetron's creations are anything but dead. Its flagship product is a slice of the jungle in a glass "biome"—part aquarium, part terrarium—about the size of a shower stall. Fish, snails and newts cavort in a foot of water at the bottom. Above them rises a mini rain forest, home to orchids, insects and even a hummingbird. All live in an ideal climate, monitored by a small computer which summons artificial rain, sunlight and breezes as needed. At \$40,000 a pop, the unit is a bit pricey, one reason Genetron has sold only a handful thus far.

But business is finally starting to blossom for Genetron, which Wolfgang launched five years ago as a sideline to his swimming pool and landscaping company in North York, Ont. Bell Canada recently rented a biome for its promotional activities on behalf of the Environmental Youth Alliance. And Wolfgang is moving closer to his dream project: creating a huge rain forest in the atrium of an office building. He's yet to find anyone willing to part with the necessary \$100,000, but last fall Wolfgang installed a small-scale version at the head office of pharmaceutical company Glaxo Canada Inc. in Missis-

sauga, Ont. For \$25,000, Wolfgang built a small island topped with a waterfall, black olive tree and hundreds of other plants outside Glaxo's boardroom. Fish cruise the surrounding moat. "One of our interests is the environment and this seemed to fit in well," says Glaxo chief executive Jacques Lapointe, who has had Wolfgang do landscaping work around his home for years.

It was perhaps inevitable that Wolfgang 41, would one day devise man-made ecosystems. As a kid, he collected insects, filled his bedroom with aquariums and played amateur naturalist on the small island in Georgian Bay that his parents bought when he was 10. Then came a biology degree from York University and summer jobs building swimming pools.

Like the makers of Biosphere II, a \$150-million (U.S.) artificial world in Arizona, Wolfgang dreams of one day building biomes on planets other than this one. In the meantime, though, he'd be just as happy injecting a little more life into the halls of corporate Canada.

— KENNETH KIDD

TRENDS

NOW SHAKE YOUR HANDS AND SAY YOU'RE SORRY

Mass layoffs and other moves to boost corporate productivity in recent years have taken an unexpected toll on managers' time: They're having to spend more of it resolving disputes between employees. A recent survey of the 1,000 largest companies in the United States found that managers now devote a median 6½ weeks each year to the settlement of staff feuding. That's up from only 4½ weeks in 1986.