

Contacts

Publisher: Ben Crowe
Editor: Paul Smaglik
Marketing Manager: David Bowen

European Head Office, London

The Macmillan Building
4 Crinan Street
London N1 9XW, UK
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4961
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Naturejobs Sales Director:
Nevin Bayoumi (4978)

UK/ RoW/ Ireland:

Andy Douglas (4975)
Nils Moeller (4953)
Irene Vigila-Atton (4944)

Scandinavia/ Spain/ Portugal:

Evelina Rubio Håkansson (4973)

Natureevents: Silje Opstrup (4994)

France/ Switzerland:

Amelie Pequignot (4974)

Advertising Production

Manager: Billie Franklin
To send materials use London address above.
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4814
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Naturejobs web development:
Tom Hancock

Naturejobs online production:
Niamh Shields

European Satellite Office

**Germany/ Austria/ Italy/
The Netherlands/ Belgium:**

Patrick Phelan
Tel + 49 89 54 90 57 11
Fax + 49 89 54 90 57 20
e-mail: p.phelan@nature.com
Sharon de Weert
Tel + 44 (0) 20 7843 4970
e-mail: s.deveert@nature.com

US Head Office, New York

345 Park Avenue South,
10th Floor, New York, NY 10010-1707
Tel +1 800 989 7718
Fax +1 800 989 7103
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

US Sales Manager: Peter Bless

Japan Head Office, Tokyo

MG Ichigaya Building (6F),
19-1 Haraikatamachi,
Shinjuku-ku,
Tokyo 162-0841
Tel +81 3 3267 8751
Fax +81 3 3267 8746
Asia-Pacific Sales Director:
Rinoko Asami
e-mail: rasami@naturejpn.com

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Cultivating black gold

A PhD student studying plant biology at the University of Sheffield, UK, has combined his taste for mushrooms, his passion for scientific analysis and his growing interest in business to pitch a plan that has turned him into a funded entrepreneur. Paul Thomas, who is working on light signalling in plants, loves truffles, but they are expensive to buy, difficult to find and almost impossible to cultivate.

But he has used his research background to show in the lab that it could be possible to create the conditions under which truffles grow. The black fungus, whose scarcity makes it worth more by the gram than gold, only appears underground on select tree roots in specific soils and climate. Thomas believes that having a rigorous scientific understanding of these conditions means he could, theoretically, start up a truffle plantation.

But graduate students tend not to have the investment capital needed to snap up land in France or Italy. Nor do they have experience or training in starting small businesses. So Thomas entered a local business-plan competition — something that science graduate students and postdocs are increasingly doing (see *Nature* 428, 676–677; 2004). Winning the local competition gave him £2,500 (US\$4,600) and the chance to compete for more cash in a BBC reality show called *Dragons' Den*, where would-be entrepreneurs make quick pitches to people who pledge venture capital to the winner (www.bbc.co.uk/dragonsden/episode4.shtml). Thomas was one of the winners there, too, giving up 25% of his company shares for a £75,000 investment.

But Thomas is not about to leave the bench just yet. Truffles take seven years to grow, if all goes right — about the time he needs to become an independent investigator. If his black gold comes up, he may have to pick between the bench and the boardroom of his own company.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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