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Eight Brilliantly Edible Ideas Rise to the Top in New Biomimicry Prize

✚ [Tate Williams](#)

One of the coolest new philanthropic prizes we've come across lately—and goodness there are a lot of them—is the Biomimicry Design Challenge. The eight finalists in the first year drew sustainable design inspiration from earthworms, carnivorous plants, and other natural wonders.

Longstanding competitions like the James Dyson Awards and the Gates Grand Challenges reliably round up a bunch of dazzling, useful ideas for the future. But the newest prize on the block is giving them a run for their money, drawing a ton of applicants, and narrowing them down to [eight finalists](#) using nature's design for sustainable food solutions.

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The Biomimicry Institute has drawn a lot of attention from some major funders recently, including Leonardo DiCaprio, and its inaugural Biomimicry Global Design Challenge is backed with \$1.5 million from the Ray C. Anderson Foundation over the next four years. The competition actually started a few years back, but it was previously just for college students, now opened up to pros around the world.

The results from the first round are pretty impressive, considering that 1,922 teams submitted entries. The deadline was in early August, and 60 judges have been sifting through them for the best ideas, now announcing eight finalists. Those eight will present their ideas at SXSW, then work on prototypes over the following nine months with mentors provided by the institute, culminating with one team winning \$100,000.

Some of the more ingenious ideas from finalists include:

- [Team Penthouse Protozoa](#) from Oregon mimicked the filtration and absorption mechanisms in earthworms and the human small intestine to make agricultural soils more efficient at holding nutrients, instead of sending them running off into water supplies and leading to toxic pollution and dead zones.
- [BioX Team](#) from Thailand looked to a future in which edible insects play a role in solving the global food crisis and reducing greenhouse gas emissions from livestock. The team looked to a variety of carnivorous plants to develop a "lobster-pot trap" to collect insect food supplies.
- [Team Planet](#) from Italy studied the way mangrove trees in salt marshes take a foothold and begin to make the land more habitable for other plants and animals. Their Mangrove Still is a solar desalination still that is low cost and uses the sun and air to produce freshwater for irrigation, making it possible to revitalize the land in coastal regions. Desalination for agriculture is usually prohibitively expensive.

We like these kinds of prizes for a lot of reasons—including, to be honest, that they're just interesting. They have their [detractors](#), but they can be successful at elevating a problem or field in the public eye. Humans are irresistibly drawn to competition, and philanthropic prizes present a great narrative of ordinary folks cooking up ideas that turn into something profitable or impactful. They're also great at casting wide nets for new ideas outside of the usual channels.

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As biomimicry pops up more frequently in sustainable design, even in other competitions, this new challenge shows potential to shine a more focused spotlight on those tinkering in the field and accelerate the viability of such technology.



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