



communicator extraordinaire Elvin McDonald

Plants, gardens, and the people who tend them are still the inspiration for this legendary garden communicator who got his start in horticulture as a toddler in the Oklahoma panhandle.

BY KELLY D. NORRIS

PASSERSBY TO the suburban corner lot in West Des Moines, Iowa, where Elvin McDonald and his husband, John Zickefoose, live, see a diligently tended garden bounded on two sides by a perimeter border framed with apricots, pears, plums, and Meiland roses.

“It’s a beautiful garden of invasive plants and tripping hazards. And I let some thistles grow to bloom and they’re quite magnificent,” McDonald says disarmingly. The former senior garden editor for *Better Homes & Gardens*, now 85, still catches people peeping through the garden gate wondering about his affiliations.

“My whole garden is really a memory garden,” says McDonald. The front yard sidewalk runs perpendicular to a rectangular bed formerly used to test buffalograss for Texas Tech. “It’s my homage to a water feature in Georgie Van de Kamp’s garden,” he says. Van de Kamp, a California-based garden designer and philanthropist, was a fellow American Horticultural Society Board member in the 1990s. An urn reminds him of a friend from church. “I see these things, these plants, and they remind me why gardening is so nurturing.”



Surrounded by plants at his home in West Des Moines, Iowa, top, Elvin McDonald can reflect on an accomplished garden communication career spanning some 70 years. In his garden, above, hydrangea flowers spill through a moon gate over a bed of hostas.

“Some of the Meiland roses have grown here 20 years,” he says. “Especially a large-flowered red with red-burnished foliage that never succumbs to black spot or powdery mildew. Even the Japanese beetles don’t favor it.” While he doesn’t recall the name, its performance merits the distinction any inveterate gardener understands; it’s stood the test of time, much like McDonald.

McDonald has left a nearly indelible mark on the way gardeners garden. Over the course of nearly 70 years, thousands of newspaper columns, and nearly 100 books, his expertise has guided readers to plant better and encouraged them to garden so they might make their house a home. He’s still here, too. “I’m so old, most people think I’m dead,” he jokes. “I don’t suppose there are too many other American Horticultural Society members much older.”

“He’s one of the great legends of horticulture,” says Marc Hachadourian, senior curator of the New York Botanical

Garden orchid collection. “Growing up a young gardener, I checked out every book possible on horticulture from my local library. I soon realized they were all written



McDonald tends plants in the greenhouse he built as a 16-year-old.

by the same person.” Thanks in part to McDonald’s accessible and approachable writing, Hachadourian fell in love with orchids, houseplants, and gesneriads at an early age. “As a kid, I kept thinking to myself that this man knows everything; look at all the books he wrote.”

DUST BOWL BEGINNINGS

McDonald’s stellar career as a gardener, writer, editor, and ambassador for horticulture spans decades and the globe. Yet his early appreciation for plants traces back to a childhood growing up in the Oklahoma panhandle, perhaps the toughest place he’d make a garden in all his life. He was born in 1937 on the day of the last bad dust storm, which his mother subsequently credited him for ending.

“I transplanted a bean plant when I was three years old and it grew,” he recalls. “I learned botany from my mother, although she never used that word.” By the time he was 10, the precocious McDonald was

collecting and selling seeds of wildflowers like poppy mallow (*Callirhoe involucrata*) that were native to the roadsides of rural Oklahoma. His mother encouraged his forays so long as he promised not to grow anything resembling a thistle or a morning glory. He also began writing letters to gardeners across the country.

"I got into the American Begonia Society and a member of the Kansas City chapter sent me a big box of cuttings to get started," he says. "My grandma King gave me some unsigned checks to buy plants and books with, which lasted until my mother realized what was going on," he says with a chuckle.

He next tried his hand with florist gloxinias, inspired by an article in the November 1949 issue of *Flower Grower* magazine. Although he characterizes his initial efforts as "dismal," it turned into a transformational experience when he wrote a letter to the editor of *Flower Grower* suggesting the creation of an organization for gloxinia fans modeled on the existing American Begonia Society.

Among the several hundred letters that came in response was one from Peggie Schulz, a passionate gardener and writer from Minneapolis, who would soon be invited by the young McDonald to become co-editor of *The Gloxinian*, a publication inspired by *The Begonian* journal of the American Begonia Society. Among other correspondents at the time were Harold E. Moore, Jr., the head of Cornell University's Bailey Hortorium; Paul Arnold, the founder of Ansco films; and Nate H. Sherman of Chicago who founded Midas Muffler. When the American Gloxinia Society (AGS) was born in 1951, McDonald was 14.

"I was plowing a wheat field when my mother brought me the first copies [of *The Gloxinian*] from the printer," he laughs.

By the time he graduated high school a few years later, the society's membership was over 3,000. The society—now known as the Gesneriad Society to better reflect its focus on the broader group of plants in the gesneriad family—has rebranded a couple of times over the years but remains a vibrant plant society today.



McDonald and fellow American Gloxinia Society members in 1954 at the organization's first annual meeting in Kansas City. From left to right: McDonald, Peggie Schultz, Horace Dillard, Vera Dillard, Gretchen Harshbarger, and Faye Witherow.

As nominal head of the AGS, McDonald attended his first American Horticultural Society (AHS) annual meeting in 1954. At that time, the AHS meeting was held simultaneously with the Garden Writers Association of America's annual

gathering. "The garden writers would take me into the taverns and order me Coca-Colas and treat me like everybody else," says McDonald, who had joined the latter group two years earlier. "I was never treated like a kid."



New York fashionista C.Z. Guest introduced McDonald to her influential social circles.

THE NEW YORK YEARS

McDonald moved to New York City in 1958 to start work on a new Eastern edition of *Flower and Garden* magazine. Pursuing another of his passions, he enrolled in the Mannes School of Music to study opera. Shortly thereafter, he was hired as outdoor books editor for Macmillan, publisher of Liberty Hyde Bailey's *Hortus* and *Hortus Second*, where he oversaw publication of the first book on horticultural therapy. The next decade would set the pace for a lifetime as an editor and author. His seminal book *Miniature Plants for Home and Greenhouse* was published in 1962, followed the next year by *The World Book of House Plants*, which is often credited for fueling a

decade-long mania for houseplants. A half century later, his authority endures.

“As a teenager, he was one of my horticultural heroes,” says Dan Heims, president of Terra Nova Nurseries in Canby, Oregon. “His books opened the doors to my interests in gesneriads and begonias, for which I remain forever grateful.”

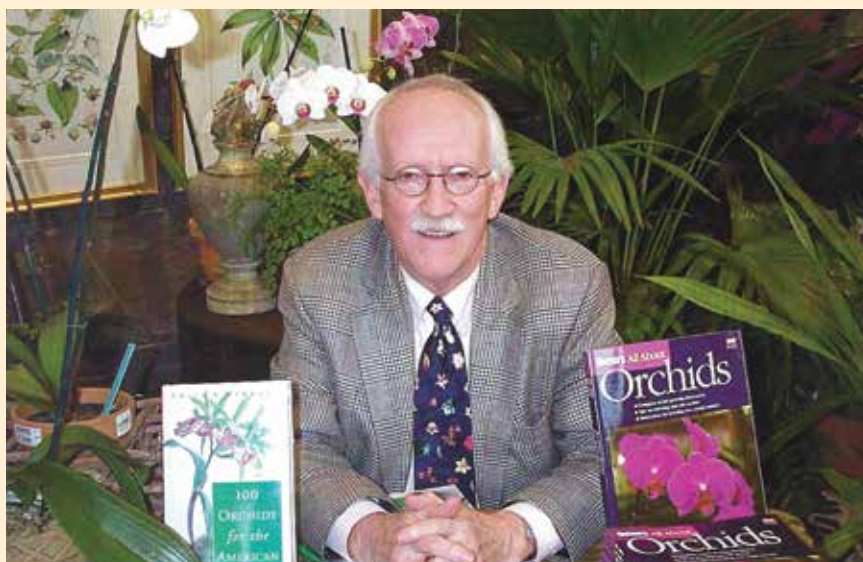
Lisa Eldred Steinkopf, author of *Houseplants: The Complete Guide to Choosing, Growing, and Caring for Indoor Plants*, which McDonald edited at her request prior to its publication in 2017, shared a similar sentiment. “My love of houseplants started at a young age, and I voraciously devoured every book I could find by him,” she says.

In 1967, at age 30, McDonald was named garden editor of *House Beautiful* magazine and soon thereafter senior editor in charge of special projects. He took to the role with verve. His hunt for famous achievers who happened to be gardeners led him to discover a book called *First Garden* by socialite and fashionista C.Z. Guest. Not long after meeting through a common connection, McDonald and Guest hit it off. She would come to call McDonald her



During his New York years, McDonald was a frequent guest on television shows such as *The Mike Douglas Show*.

gardening husband, picking him up on Friday afternoons in her Jaguar to whisk him away to the country for a long weekend of gardening and socializing. Through Guest grew associations with people like world-renowned landscape architect Russell Page and actress and comedian Joan Rivers. McDonald became a regular in national media, appearing on daytime television with hosts like Al Roker, Steve Doocy, and Phil



SELECTED BOOKS BY ELVIN MCDONALD

Elvin McDonald has authored numerous books over his long career. Here's a selected list of just a few of the titles that have enlightened generations of gardeners.

The 100 Best Annuals: A Practical Encyclopedia, Random House, 1997.

The 400 Best Garden Plants: A Practical Encyclopedia of Annuals, Perennials, Bulbs, Trees and Shrubs, Gramercy, 1998.

Better Homes and Gardens Successful Rose Gardening, Meredith, 1993.

A Garden Makes a House a Home, The Monacelli Press, 2012.

House Beautiful: Outdoor Living & Gardens, Hearst Books, 1990.

How to Grow Flowers from Seeds, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1979.

How to Grow House Plants from Seeds, Mason/Charter, 1976.

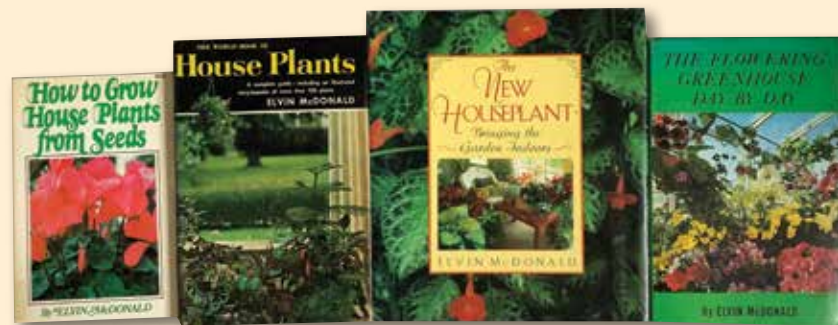
Little Plants for Small Spaces, M. Evans and Company, Inc., 1975.

The New Houseplant: Bringing the Garden Indoors, Macmillan, 1993.

Northeast Gardening: The Diverse Art and Special Considerations of Gardening in the Northeast, Macmillan, 1990.

Smith & Hawken: 100 Orchids for the American Gardener, Workman Publishing, 1998.

Stop Talking to Your Plants and Listen, Funk & Wagnalls, 1977.



Donahue, always to talk plants and offer gardening advice.

In 1985, McDonald shifted careers to become the director of special projects at Brooklyn Botanic Garden (BBG), a position he held under President Donald Moore until 1992. At a party for the opening of the New York Flower Show

in March 1985, Moore suggested that McDonald write a book about being a gardener in the style of George Plimpton's *Paper Lion*, a chronicle of a journalist embedded with the training camp of the 1963 Detroit Lions football team. Beginning in April 1985, McDonald became a gardener for DC-37, New York City's largest pub-

lic employee union, punching the clock in a green gabardine uniform. While the book never materialized, the experience prepared him for working with union gardeners later in his career as Friends Director at the then Des Moines Botanical Center. Among his accomplishments in his time at BBG, McDonald developed a rooftop garden for the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and served as an advisor to horticulture curriculum for the New York City school board.

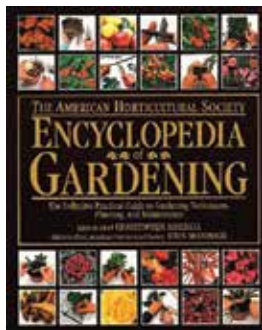
MOVING AND GROWING

McDonald left New York in 1992 and moved to Houston, Texas, intending to segue from journalism into a new life designing gardens. He did a weekly television program, managed an upscale garden center called The Compleat Gardener, and designed, installed, and maintained public and private gardens.

“I will say this about all of my work: it’s based on my being a gardener,” says McDonald. “But the more I worked in gardening, the more the journalism insisted.” Offers for books kept coming, resulting in the *Traditional Home Book of Roses*, *400 Best Garden Plants*, and *The Color Garden* series. He also advised on the Emmy Award-winning television series *Gardens of the World* with Audrey Hepburn and the book of the same name with consulting editor Penelope Hobhouse.

McDonald served on the Board of the American Horticultural Society in the early 1990s, but his most important

contribution to the organization came when he was recruited by AHS Board members John Whitworth Jr. and George Ball to work on a project to



“preserve all the true old gardener tasks before so-called progress struck them from memory,” as he puts it. After trips to London to work alongside the creative team at Dorling Kindersley publishing, McDonald completed the first edit for the American edition of the *AHS Encyclopedia of Gardening*, which was published in 1993.



McDonald on a tour of English landscape designer Rosemary Verey’s Barnsley House garden in 1998, top. After more than six years with the Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden, above, McDonald retired in 2013. McDonald’s design projects included the gardens at Salisbury House Museum in Des Moines, right.



McDonald went on to serve as a member of the AHS’s Editorial Advisory Board for many years, offering invaluable perspective on the organization’s publications.

In 1995, headhunters from the Meredith Corporation recruited him to become garden editor at *Traditional Home*, based out of New York. Not interested in returning to the city, he agreed to take the job only on the condition that he would be based out of Des Moines.

“I made the choice to come to Iowa because of the Midwestern women who had influenced me as a teenager, like Gretchen Harshbarger and Peggie Schulz,” he says. Both were correspondents with the teenage McDonald. Harshbarger, a Cornell-trained landscape architect from Iowa City, Iowa, and the niece of seedsman

Henry Field of Shenandoah, Iowa, was an early president of the Garden Writers Association of America (now Garden Communicators International) and a charter member of the American Gloxinia Society. Schulz, in addition to her early role with the Gloxinia Society, was an established authority on indoor gardening. “Iowa felt like where I wanted to live. I always love where I am anyway,” he says.

McDonald’s late career in Des Moines bears hallmarks of the earlier chapters—writing, organizing and activating the community with better horticulture. He spent five years with *Traditional Home* before moving up a floor to Meredith’s flagship *Better Homes & Gardens*, becoming executive garden editor until his retirement in 2007. While for many that would have

been a storybook ending to an otherwise storied career, McDonald wasn't done yet.

In Des Moines, McDonald put down roots and became involved in many community causes, consulting on garden projects for local cultural institutions and Terrace Hill, the Iowa governor's residence, as well as supporting the Des Moines Public Library Foundation and the Des Moines Metro Opera. His adopted hometown honored him accordingly with an Iowa Author Award in 2011 and designated him a "Sage Over 70" in 2016. But perhaps his most enduring contribution grew from his election to the board of the Friends of the Des Moines Botanical Center in 2007.

At that time the facility was operated by the Des Moines Water Works in a special

McDonald's efforts led to an influx of community engagement and eventual philanthropic support, a domino effect that led the nonprofit to assume ownership of the facility in 2012 and rebrand as the Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden. In honor of his service and contributions, the organization commissioned daffodil breeders Becky and Brent Heath to name a variety in his honor. 'Elvin's Voice', a white, triandrus-type daffodil, is among the last to flower each spring. Following this latest triumph, McDonald retired, for real this time, in 2013. He continues his association with the garden, however, and last fall he was fêted at the opening of a new permanent Gesneriad Exhibit created in his honor in the Gardeners Show House.

From a field in Oklahoma to the pinnacle of the field of garden communication, McDonald's career has fine-tuned his instincts for what gardeners want and need to know. His outlook on gardening and the role it can play in a modern world remains as hopeful as ever. "We need more front gardens, actually, and just better landscape design guidance," he says. "We need more help coping with the actual spaces where we live. I think outdoor living rooms are as important as ever."

He recalls thinking during the Covid-19 pandemic how gardening always put his mind in a better place, literally and figuratively. "Millions of people are discovering that anew right now," he says. "I think there's a great opportunity




McDonald and his husband, John Zickefoose, above, enjoy spending time outdoors in their West Des Moines garden, left. A decorative urn filled with plants stands in a plot formerly used to test buffalograss for its potential as a lawn substitute.

arrangement with the City of Des Moines, a unique relationship designed as an interim operating solution for the declining public attraction. While McDonald was happy to be involved, he wasn't sure that being president of a volunteer organization was the most he could do. He suggested a new role, director of the Friends organization, which would allow him to create content and programming that would bolster the group's fundraising activities. The gambit succeeded. Among his first projects was to convert, with support from local Master Gardeners, a derelict greenhouse into the Gardeners Show House, a dynamic exhibit space for inspiring and teaching.

ELVIN'S VOICE

McDonald is a masterful storyteller with an uncanny ability to weave the threads of seemingly disparate people and events into a compelling narrative. As he reflects on his life among plants, he can't help but sound homiletic: "Gardening is an act of worship." His voice carries, thanks in part to his opera training, drawing people in.

"He finds horticultural motivation in everything he does and every direction he turns," says Michael Riley, an avid New York City horticulturist who has known McDonald for years. "The man knows no boundaries; he just follows his instincts and passions."

and need for volunteers [in public space]. Because if you're retiring at 60 and living longer, you better be active." McDonald foresees smaller home gardens in the future and an ever-more-critical role of public and community gardens in the fabric of our cities. "If you're willing to be part of a larger picture, public horticulture is very satisfying." 

Kelly D. Norris is a plantsman, curator, and artist based in Des Moines, Iowa. His most recent book, published in 2021, is New Naturalism: Designing and Planting a Resilient, Ecologically Vibrant Home Garden.