



The accidental GARDENER

He has presented *Gardeners' World* for some 15 years but he never meant to be a full-time gardener. Monty Don talks about life before, behind and beyond the camera

WORDS BY LAURA SILVERMAN

Wherever Monty Don goes, his fans want to know one thing: where's Nigel? There was the woman who ran across the road to ask him in Tokyo, the passenger who approached him on a flight in Missouri and the policeman at Buckingham Palace. "I was going to the Palace for something [his OBE] and this policeman with a machine gun asked, 'Have you brought your dog, sir?' They weren't interested in me. Nigel was a mega international superstar."

Then, this May, Nigel, the nation's best-loved golden retriever, died. "It was completely out of the blue," says Monty from Longmeadow, the Herefordshire farmhouse where he lives with his wife, Sarah. "I still miss him terribly." Nigel, who was almost 12, had suffered fits during the night. Monty thinks he might have had a brain tumour. He describes him as "a lovely dog" but says that all their dogs – a quick count by Monty reveals four – are part of the family.

The difference is that Nigel was also loved by millions of viewers of *Gardeners' World*, where he would often appear. When Monty told his 188,000 Twitter followers, he received a flood of condolence messages: "Nigel had two qualities that were special. He was extraordinary in front of a camera. He was like a B-movie star. He worked ten hours a day. He'd learn his lines, step in at the right place at the right time and hit the mark." Monty seems in awe. "He was also a symbol for a pure kind of goodness. He gave just enough to let you in, but not so much that it stopped you adding whatever you liked."

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

Monty Don, now 65, has been presenting *Gardeners' World* for almost 20 years, but he developed this career by accident. In the

1980s, he ran a jewellery business with Sarah that counted Elton John and Princess Diana as customers. Gardening was "a private passion". He started writing about it only after the press picked up on a picture of his own garden in an article about his fashion success. When the jewellery company went bust in the recession of the early Nineties, his sideline took off: he had found his calling.

Today, *Gardeners' World* – Monty's regular gig, alongside gardening documentaries, books and columns – is filmed at Longmeadow. This year, despite lockdown, the team powered on. Many of the programmes were filmed by remote control. The BBC dug cabling into the garden, connecting cameras to screens in two shipping containers in the drive. The director sat in one; the camera operator and the sound recordist in the other. They spoke to Monty on walkie-talkies. "It was all filmed without me ever seeing another human being," Monty says, unfazed. "Needs must."

And viewers loved it. The show attracted an audience of almost three million, its highest for a decade: "I think people liked the fact that it was honest. It was almost like a live broadcast: the cameras just filmed what happened. That gave it a different feel."

Many of us also turned to gardening ourselves. Monty hopes this means we now have a closer relationship with nature. "It could be with a robin, it could be with a worm, it could be with the weather... I think more people now realise that it's interesting, and it's not going to cease to be interesting just because you're now allowed to get on a bus or go shopping."

Noticing the everyday was "the driving purpose" behind Monty's new book, *My Garden World*: "I wanted to show that this big, mysterious natural world is just outside your door. It's yours. It's not something that happens elsewhere to other people or in other places. It's right here and now, today." ▶

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A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP
Monty, who grew up in the Hampshire countryside, remembers sowing carrots aged 17 and feeling “at home”. His own relationship is with the soil, a need he once described as “a fix”. He likes “the process of gardening”: watching things grow through the seasons and doing it himself. “I like growing things, almost anything, and I’ve always been driven by gardening rather than plants... I am not a plants person; I am a gardener and I like gardens. I can be happy and stimulated by a garden with no special plants. A simple plant like a rose can give me as much pleasure as the rarest plant in the world.”

Monty also finds gardening “a healing activity”, a way to work through problems. “I’m physically engaged, using all my concentration, but in a fairly mindless way. I’m not thinking about what I’m doing, I’m just doing it.” The therapeutic aspect and the connection to the soil is especially beneficial in winter: it offers Monty temporary relief from seasonal affective disorder. He has written eloquently before about suffering from depression – in the Nineties, he was unable to leave his bed for weeks. “After writing that first article 25 years ago, I realised that I almost had a duty to speak up because I had a voice,” he says today. “Since then, I’ve tried to do what I can, but I don’t like doing it, I don’t take any pride or pleasure in it. I just feel this is what I have to do.” Over the years, Monty has been a patron of Thrive, the mental health charity, and lobbied government ministers. Now he is working with a mental health and gardening project in Oxford. “I want to get some kind of structure into our NHS. There are very, very good people in it, but the system is chaotic.”

Monty is affected by light, making October, when the clocks go back, a mixed month. “From the beginning to the end, there is quite a shocking difference. You’re gardening against the clock because you know there will be bad weather... But there is also this vaguer sense of the door closing, that everything is coming to an end.” November and December are “the worst two months of the year by a long shot”. At least by January “things are growing in small ways”. To get through the darkest days, Monty uses light-therapy boxes, and gardens for an hour or two in the afternoon. He also relies on his dogs. “The thing about dogs is that they need looking after: they have to be fed, they have to be taken for a walk. It stops you thinking so much about yourself.” He talks of one day escaping to the South of France or Italy for the winter to write.

THE RECLUSIVE WRITER

This winter, however, he will write from his study, where he sits today, against a wall of 2,000 gardening books (another 18,000 on art, local history, cookery and fiction fill other rooms). His

publisher still expects another couple of books from him (to add to the previous 22), and he’ll keep writing his journals, which he has done since he was 17.

Monty has said before that he sees himself as a professional writer and amateur gardener. Self-taught might be more accurate, but the point stands that his writing is important to him. He likes the “urgency” of making television, and the company, but he wouldn’t want to do it all the time: “It would drive me mad.” He seems deeply comfortable in the immersive solitude of his study. “In winter, I sit in this room for weeks on end and only see my family – and not a lot either because we’re like ships in the night.” Aside from those *Gardeners’ World*

shipping containers, Monty “hardly noticed” lockdown. “We live in the middle of the countryside and barely socialise. We might see friends once a month, but in usual circumstances, I can easily not leave the house for a week.”

It’s as close, perhaps, as Monty might get to one of his early inspirations: TH White. In *My Garden World*, Monty talks about the “life-changing experience” of reading *The Goshawk* aged 17 – where the author retreats to a cottage on a farm and tries to tame a wild bird. He adds today that it was “like a tuning fork, it hummed to my vibrations”. Monty liked “the romance of being a solitary figure”, writing “I longed to live alone in the woods with my dog and hawk and seriously planned and intended to do that”. Those plans were derailed by a spell at Cambridge to read English, where he met Sarah and questioned whether he would be happy alone. “For the first time,” he writes, “there was someone that I wanted to be with more than myself.”

But something about the book continued to resonate. “It made me see the natural world as terrifyingly raw and something you can’t control,” he says. “You are the tiniest part of it. You are no more or less significant than anything else. You have a relationship to it that is equal at best. That’s exactly how I continue to feel.”

While there is still no hawk on the horizon, there has at least been a dog – or several. Thousands of us would have missed Nigel had he been co-opted to live in the woods with Monty and his hawk – either that or *Gardeners’ World* would have looked very different. And maybe we need someone to point out the joy of the everyday. “The point – and I feel this very strongly – is that to look after the natural world, you have to begin at home,” Monty says, returning to his latest work. “You have to care about the bacteria in your soil and the spiders and the pigeons and all the things we take for granted because otherwise they will go. That’s the evangelical side of it. I just want people to realise that the richness of this world is incredible.”

TURN THE PAGE to read an extract from Monty Don’s new book.



Monty's MOMENTS

1955 Born in Berlin, where his father was in the army. The family move to Hampshire when Monty is one

1979 Meets Sarah at Cambridge (the couple now have three children and a grandson). At university, he keeps a dog, plus six hens in the outside loo

1981 The couple start Monty Don Jewellery. Elton John and Princess Diana are fans

1989 Makes his TV debut on a short gardening slot on ITV’s *This Morning*

1992 The jewellery business goes bust. Monty and Sarah lose their house. Monty sinks into depression

2003 Joins *Gardeners’ World* as lead presenter

2008-2011 Takes a break from *Gardeners’ World*, following a mini stroke

2016 Publishes *Nigel: My Family and Other Dogs*, recognising the importance of paws in his life

2018 Appointed OBE for services to horticulture, broadcasting and charity

2020 Writes *My Garden World*, celebrating the joy in the everyday

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARSHA ARNOLD; JASON INGRAM

All of a FLUTTER

Monty Don loves all animals. Except one. Here, he reveals why a certain small mammal sets his pulse racing in panic



Everybody has a wildlife blind spot. Some cannot abide spiders – others, snakes. I have even heard that there are people who do not love dogs and that some are just not cat people. It seems incredible, but there are even people who fail to see the charms of a pig.

By and large, I love all animals. I am not spooked by snakes, can see the virtue of rats and don't get fazed by wasps, hornets or moths banging into me as I read in bed on a warm September night. But I am chiroptophobic. I hate bats.

Well, not exactly hate. I have no objection at all to them as long as they stay well away from me. But I do hate the way they bomb me at dusk when I am working or walking in the garden, hate the way they swoop around outside the house, and really, really hate it when occasionally they fly inside.

I used to hate birds fluttering around the house but seem to have pretty much grown out of that – mainly through handling chickens and because it is so lovely having swallows flying in and out all summer long. So I suspect that my panicked reaction has to do with the bats' zany flight and fluttering, rather than the thought of them as ugly mice borne on leathery wings. I find it hard not to think of them as anything other than slightly

repulsive, but I know that bats do a huge amount of good, are fascinating and should be encouraged. I approve of them wholeheartedly – but would happily never see another bat again. However, we have lots of them in both garden and farm, so I am sure to see them daily between April and October for the rest of my life.

They are preyed upon – hobbies and tawny owls can and do catch them and anyone who has had a cat knows that sooner or later it will turn up with a bat. The only real danger to them comes from loss of habitat and insect prey rather than any predation. Only the great crested newt is as championed and protected as bats.

The one fact that everyone knows about bats is that they eat a huge quantity of insects. Some catch insects as small as midges, while others eat moths, beetles, craneflies and even flying ants. The pipistrelle – the smallest and commonest of our native bats – is reputed to eat up to 3,000 midges every night.

Many catch their prey in the air but some, like the lesser horseshoe bat or the natter's bat, will pick prey off leaves and branches as they pass. Some, like the noctule, fly high, and others, such as horseshoe bats, fly low to the ground and even hunt from perches.

I know of these things but I cannot say that I go out of my way to observe them for myself. But I do like watching the noctules

flying on a summer's evening like swifts, high in the sky and surprisingly straight and fast. And pipistrelles are so common with us that their flight paths, like the randomly waved tracery of a sparkler in the dark in a child's hand, are part of the pattern of dusk. In fact, having watched pipistrelles in the garden here for more than 25 years, despite instinctively avoiding them, I cannot help but notice that they have set hunting grounds that are very local and specific, and that one or sometimes two bats will work them for 20 minutes at a time. Around the hop kiln is one, the mound another, the path up to the Paradise Garden a third. Obviously, this is due to the prevalence of insects at those places but it is interesting that those hunting grounds are so particular.

There are 18 species of British bat. I have a friend who has horseshoe bats in his cellar and another who had to accommodate – with a specially built dormer bat entrance – horseshoe bats in his attic. I have seen pipistrelles and noctules in the garden and pipistrelles and a barbastelle on the farm. The latter are very rare; we disturbed one that was roosting under a flap of bark on an old tree. Barbastelles like woodland near water and are only found in South Wales, Sussex and Devon.

I was leaning out of the bedroom window one lovely September morning as dawn rose, when two bats swooped in about an inch from my face and disappeared into the gap between the window

and the frame. Given my feelings about bats, you may imagine I was not entirely happy about this. But I accept that we share our home and outbuildings with them, and probably the woods, too. Having them in the garden is entirely a good thing, and the surest way of encouraging them is to make life good for your insect population. Also, bats will be drawn to water, partly because of the way it attracts insects but also because they need to drink, so a pond will always encourage them to any garden.

I remember, when filming *Around the World in 80 Gardens*, going down a side tributary of the Amazon in a motorised canoe as dusk fell. Suddenly, out of the trees that flanked either side of this river – tiny by Amazonian standards but about the width of the Thames as it goes through Westminster – thousands of bats streamed out over the water, criss-crossing back and forth as they hunted. They had large, sharply pointed wings – bigger than any British bat – and for about 40 minutes, they flew around and among us. On the one hand, this was my worst nightmare, but on the other, it was fascinating; I had no choice but to give in to the experience and try to relish it.

EXTRACTED FROM *My Garden World – the Natural Year* by Monty Don (John Murray, £20).



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