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# Monty Don

## How his garden helped him grow

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# *Monty* is... *bustin' out* *all over*

Words Tiffany Daneff

It may be winter, but Britain's favourite gardener Monty Don is blooming. With a new TV series and more books out this year, he's never been busier. Here, the hardy perennial reveals how his upbringing forged his driven nature – and how his garden has eased the blows of many personal setbacks



ALAMY, JASON INGRAM

**T**he ground may be rock solid and shrubs rimed with frost, but even the harshest winter is unlikely to stop Monty Don from doing a spot of gardening.

He arrives dressed, as ever, in rugged linen workwear, even though this interview is being conducted in the monochrome confines of the publisher's office. We are here to discuss his latest book *Down to Earth* – unbelievably, his 19th – the garnering of 50 years of gardening experience.

Plenty of people infinitely less busy than Monty (his parents named him Montagu) might congratulate themselves after writing a single book. But 2018 looks like it is going to be a humdinger for the nation's favourite polymath, author, broadcaster and – absolutely not forgetting – owner of four dogs, notably Nigel, the golden retriever who has more Twitter followers than most humans.

This month, Monty is presenting *Paradise Gardens* on

BBC Two, which is about Islamic gardens and has taken him from Bradford to Morocco, around the Middle East and as far as Kashmir. There will be an accompanying book.

Spring and summer will hurtle straight into the seasonal whirlwind of filming BBC *Gardeners' World*, appearing at countless garden shows, giving hours of talks and writing a monthly garden column.

As if that wasn't enough to leave a grown man wilting, somehow he will scratch together the time, between pulling tulips and planting out lettuces, to write a memoir exploring the role animals play in our health and happiness, a subject that is understandably close to his heart.

And, we're not finished: he is also contracted to write a third memoir, this time taking the reader back to his childhood, growing up in Hampshire.

He seems remarkably at ease, though, the sun shining on those famously chiselled cheekbones. You'd never guess that he has been so busy this



past fortnight that he has barely had time to garden.

'Week before last I had two parties to go to, one in Kent and one in London, then I had a meeting with the BBC, so Saturday, Sunday, Monday, I was away. I filmed Tuesday, Wednesday. I then had to write all Thursday. I then had to go back to London on Friday to get a visa. I was writing all Saturday, filmed all Sunday and Monday, and then I went to Iran Tuesday to Saturday. Then a photoshoot Monday, filming Tuesday, Wednesday and a talk yesterday and came up here last night.'

It afforded him about an hour or two of gardening on one of those writing days and an hour the day before we meet. This clearly pains him.

'On a very basic level, the garden is my constant point of reference, so when I put my hands in the soil – and it does always have to be hands and soil – I am grounding myself, and no matter whether I'm angry or I'm sad or bewildered or tired, or whatever I might be, it

**Shear bliss**  
Monty grabs a moment's breather from his hectic horticultural schedule

recharges the bits that need recharging and soothes away that which needs salving.'

UNLIKE MOST OF US, Monty does have help in the form of two full-time gardeners with whom he remains in constant touch via text. But then his garden at Longmeadow in Herefordshire isn't just his garden, it is the backdrop for his *Gardeners' World* filming. Which begs the question, isn't this rather like living above the shop?

'The truth is,' he says, 'I don't know whether I should say this,

“**I used to be a very driven person and very competitive, not surprising given my upbringing**”

as it breaks a myth – home is work, and the only time it feels like not work is occasionally at the weekend – about one weekend out of three or four, when I just garden all the time.'

It might be tempting to say, well, tough luck, that's a small price to pay for the devotion of

the two and half million loyal fans who regularly switch on to *Gardeners' World*. But this seems ungenerous towards someone who has publicly talked about his debilitating depression and who has battled through more than his fair share of setbacks. At the age of 19, his twin sister was severely injured in a horrific car crash that affected the whole family. Then there was the collapse of his jewellery company in the 1980s and a minor stroke.

His way of managing has always been to throw himself into projects. He's a large man, tall and broad shouldered, built to be a boxer (he won his blue at Cambridge) and to slice a shovel clean into hard soil.

His friend and fellow gardener, Sarah Raven, recalls that when he was making his first big country garden in Herefordshire he actually hired floodlights so that he could continue digging at night. Yet stirred in with the sturdy loam from which he's made is a lighter, more unexpected layer, an elegance of thought

## Potted Monty

From the boxing ring to the potting shed, despite a series

of personal setbacks throughout his life, the gardening guru always springs up again

### 1955

Born in West Berlin where his father, a soldier, is stationed, but grows up in Hampshire.

### 1960s and 70s

Despite failing his A-levels first time, he reads English at Magdalene College, Cambridge where he wins a blue for boxing and meets his future wife, Sarah.



### 1980s

With Sarah, a jeweller, he opens Monty Don Jewellery, designing and selling costume pieces to Princess Diana, Boy George and Michael Jackson from their Knightsbridge shop.



### 1990s

After 'Black Monday' and the stock market crash in October 1987, the business goes bust. The Dons lose everything, including their home and furniture. He publishes his first book *The Prickotty Bush* about moving from London to Herefordshire.

### 1991

A 'painful and difficult' time in which depression hits Monty badly.

### 1994

Starts writing for newspapers and magazines and gets his first TV work presenting gardening on *This Morning*.



### 2003

To the shock of many, Monty takes over from Alan Titchmarsh as the first self-taught presenter of *Gardeners' World*.

### 2006

On *Desert Island Discs* he picks the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night* as his favourite record, plus works of the 17th-century metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan and a Rembrandt.

### 2008

Following a minor stroke, Monty stands down from *Gardeners' World*.

### 2011

After viewing figures tumble, *Gardeners' World* asks Monty to return. He agrees on condition he broadcasts from his home garden, Longmeadow in Herefordshire (another first for the show).



### 2014

Monty's Nigel, below, joins Twitter! @montysdognigel now has more than 32,000 followers and counting.

### 2016

Ends eight years as President of the Soil Association.

### 2018

Look out for *Paradise Gardens* book and TV series.

ALAMY, JASON INGRAM, DAFYDD JONES, GRAHAM STONE / RETNA PICTURES

## Interview

◁ and notable felicity of style. In *Down to Earth* he sums up what it is to garden in cold weather in a couple of simple sentences: 'Mud becomes solid. You can walk dry-shod and push wheelbarrows full of muck or weeds over it.' Immediately, we're there, too, feeling the hard ground underfoot.

MONTY IS BOTH ILLUMINATING AND PASSIONATE while not losing his train of thought.

'I used to be a very driven person,' he says, 'and very competitive, not surprising given my upbringing. I had to get up and get out and do things.'

He talks freely about his childhood. He and his brothers grew up with a five-acre garden at the family home in Hampshire that was tended by a full-time gardener until Monty was about seven or eight, when the gardener fell off a ladder and damaged his back. 'Mr Roberts lived in a tied cottage and my parents, of course, didn't kick him out, but nor could they offer a cottage for the replacement, so they didn't get one.'

Monty's mother, who had been brought up in the house, determined that the garden would still be maintained to a certain level. And the family would do this. Duty called.

'I don't remember any aesthetic, cultural, sensual appreciation of the garden – it was entirely practical. We grew vegetables and fruit to eat, we had a big lawn, we had a grass tennis court – you mowed it in order that you could play tennis. I remember sieving leaf mould to make potting compost for chrysanthus. It was horrible.'

He recalls endless digging and a lot of shearing, and edging and mowing. 'No one seemed to



**A Don deal**  
Monty and his wife Sarah – they married in 1983 – in the garden of their Herefordshire home, Longmeadow

have any love of plants. For my parents, particularly my mother, it was completely and utterly dictated by duty. Duty to everything – duty to the church, duty to God, duty to the community, duty to the garden. It was a kind of neurotic sense that you had to pay your debt – the great mantra was, "God first, others next, self last". That was absolutely the motto.

'The "self last" was as important as the "God first". It wasn't a sort of "be one with God", it was "don't get above yourself. Make sure everything else is done before. You are the least important person in every situation. You are the person that deserves and receives the least."

'That was absolutely their credo – my father, who was

an Army officer, was absolutely "horses first, men next, self last". So, in honesty, the whole culture was one of jobs and duty. The upside was they inculcated into all their children a work ethic, which is useful if you automatically can get up at any time and go to work and get it done. I don't resent that at all. A lot of people never have that.'

He says he is much changed now and this comes across in his new book – gardeners are not bullied into seasonal tasks but gently enthused and encouraged through the year.

'I used to have a kind of muscular Christianity – the garden was something that could be made and tamed and brought to heel.' He talks with obvious passion about turning that around, of being less prescriptive and having more humility. One suspects that this is a reaction to those endless gardening tips he must deliver. The motto now is: forget the how and when and think more about the whys of doing what you do: 'Rather than hands-on gardening, fingertip gardening.'

Perhaps this explains why he is creating a private garden, to be kept secret from the world.

'We have a farm as well, where I do spend as much time as I can, and that is completely private. It's in mid-Wales, in the Black Mountains. I'm making a garden there. But I've never written about it; I've never photographed it; I've never filmed it because I know from experience once that door is opened you can't go back.'

“**When I put my hands in the soil, I am grounding myself. It recharges the bits that need recharging and soothes that which needs salving**”

*Down to Earth*, £17.99, is out now; new series *Paradise Gardens* starts this month on BBC Two and the book is published in March; *Gardener's World* returns in spring