



Henry Mitchell on Gardening

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Gardeners disagree about many things—cannas, double petunias, the color magenta—but on one subject they are unanimous. Henry Mitchell was simply the best garden writer this country has ever produced. As Allen Lacy writes in his introduction to this, the final collection of Mitchell's gardening essays, "In a time when most garden writing was lethally dull and as impersonal as a committee report, Henry Mitchell was the great exception. He was often funny. He was always passionate, for his loves were many, although by the evidence he was especially enamored of bearded irises, roses, and dragonflies. He was endlessly quotable, whether he was telling his faithful readers that 'marigolds should be used as sparingly as ultimatums' or reminding them that 'to go from winter to summer you have to pass March.'" But Mitchell was more than a master essayist whose newspaper columns were read and treasured even by those who had no interest in gardens or in his other passion, dogs. He was a great teacher. As one reviewer said of his book *One Man's Garden*, it "reflects a zest for gardening and provides more useful advice than one could find in a dozen how-to books." For twenty years Mitchell's column "The Essential Earthman" was a weekly feature in the *Washington Post*. And whether he was extolling the perfection of the capital's summer weather (best enjoyed at six A.M. while viewing his water lilies and eating an ice-cold Vidalia onion sandwich) or deriding the idea that England was a decent place to garden or extolling the virtue of leaving plants alone if they are doing well, his reputation spread through friends who clipped his columns and sent them to those unlucky enough not to have access to the *Post*. When his first collection, *The Essential Earthman*, was published, Mitchell became the national treasure he deserved to be. As Lacy writes, "These books will continue to find and delight new readers long into the coming century, for they are classics."

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