

# In the Beginning ... There Were Gloxinias!

---

Michael Riley

*(A talk given at the closing dinner of the AGGS 50th Anniversary Convention in Kansas City. The talk was illustrated with many original slides taken in the 1950's by Albert Buell.)*

Whenever I speak to a group about gesneriads, I always start with a photo of a florist gloxinia and say "In the beginning ... there were gloxinias". It establishes a recognizable concept and frame of reference for everything that follows. It is admittedly my concept, but it is not a solitary concept—in fact, it is the reason that The American Gloxinia & Gesneriad Society exists today, in this time and place.

The first time I heard Elvin McDonald speak, 25 years ago, he explained that he loved gloxinias because they were such graphic flowers, no matter what the color or pattern; it was simply an exciting concept to know that one could grow and bloom such wonderful flowers. He was not alone in feeling that excitement; his inspiration was shared by thousands of other growers through his magazine, *THE GLOXINIAN*, and his organization, The American Gloxinia Society.

Other groups existed during this time, in the early 1950s, for enthusiasts of begonias, roses, hemerocallis, and assorted other horticultural interests. It seems that the post-war years of the mid to late 1940's had produced, not only a baby boom, but also a new interest in horticulture; particularly growing plants indoors, on windowsills, in greenhouses, and under artificial lights.

Liberty Hyde Bailey established the Bailey Hortorium at Cornell University in 1935 with the purpose of bridging the gap between horticulture as an applied science and botany as pure science. Their public face, and academic publication *Baileya*, did not emerge until 1953, but Dr. Harold E. Moore Jr. and Dr. Robert E. Lee, among others, became more than professors of knowledge to their students—they were every gesneriad's best friends. Horticulture was not only popular to home hobbyists, it was a science and an industry. Not since the days of Louis van Houtte in Belgium, in the mid-to-late 19th Century, had such popular interest been so evident.

In Connecticut, Albert Buell found his inspiration in a florist gloxinia during the early 1940s; he gave up a career in a woodworking shop to pursue his passion for a deep purple slipper gloxinia and a big round speckled one. His "giant-flowered" hybrids quickly became widely known and grown. Other hybridizers and growers added fuel to the fire such as Antonelli Brothers in California and Jack Sweet at Earl J. Small's in Florida. It may have seemed that Elvin McDonald invented the florist gloxinia, but in reality, he simply created a "feeding frenzy," not unlike the popularization of tulips and many other horticultural manias throughout history.

The members of the American Gloxinia Society grew many other plants, some gesneriads and some not. A very early letter to the editor asked if "there could please be a round robin on a subject other than raising gloxinias." As important a tool of communication as was *THE GLOXINIAN*, members still needed to communicate one to one. Round robins were initiated within the first year, and hundreds of members quickly joined on a

variety of topics. With such a demand for growing, members needed something to grow. So, also within the first year, Elvin provided three selections of seed, two of gloxinia hybrids and some streptocarpus from a Dutch source. A year later, the pollen bank and a seed fund were established, which ultimately offered 21 species of gesneriads plus a wide assortment of other plant material.

Florence Carrell was in charge of the seed fund and wrote a column entitled "The Armchair Explorer." She seems to have not spent much time in her armchair, but was always traveling, writing, and searching for seed to offer the membership, something like a hybrid between Maryjane Evans and Jeanne Katzenstein. Florence Carrell had "collectors" in many countries, and she once wrote about her discovery of two new species, *Nautilocalyx lynchii* and *N. forgetii* ... exhibited at a livestock show in Los Angeles. The pages of THE GLOXINIAN tell us that Elvin was growing such exotic gesneriads as *Ramonda myconi*, which although in cultivation since 1604, had not really ever been grown and "talked about". This was true of much of the plant material that our members grew.

An examination of the show schedule for our first convention in 1954 shows an interesting assortment of what was being grown. There were 13 classes for hybrid florist gloxinias, five for other species *Sinningia*, one for "Gloxinias of Botanist" (presumably meaning "real" gloxinias although it seems that only *Gloxinia perennis* was in cultivation), 20 classes for *Episcia*, one class for "Bigeneric hybrids" (Stroxinias — *Streptocarpus* × *Gloxinia*), one class for *Streptocarpus* species, one for Weismoor hybrids, one for other *Streptocarpus* hybrids, a class for *Didymocarpus*, three species of *Reichsteineria*, five *Kohleria* species and one hybrid class, three *Chirita* classes (all annuals), six *Columnea* classes, three species of *Aeschynanthus*, five *Smithiantha* classes, one *Hypocyrtia* (*Nematanthus*), one *Achimenes*, two *Alloplectus*, 12 *Saintpaulia* classes, a dish garden class and seven classes for arrangements, including "button garden" and "spoon garden". The structure for awards was somewhat similar to today, and the judging must have been a complex process. The names of the plants seem interestingly archaic by today's nomenclature. Some names were stuck in a time warp and others changed daily. The show attracted over 2000 people, and Albert Buell spoke for over two hours on "Growing Gloxinias." This public interest or "stirring of the pot" by the members of The American Gloxinia Society seems to have raised the consciousness of both the world of botany and horticulture.

The show schedule for the second convention listed 79 varieties of florist gloxinias by name, plus a similar assortment of other classes. Everybody grew gloxinias, by every means possible and using every technique imaginable. There were infinite articles on raising gloxinias from seed, growing them in dishpans, in casseroles, rooting them in glass jars and in plastic wrap, co-editor Peggie Schulz even grew them in a "leaky fish mold"—they were gorgeous, no doubt. Members wrote about their soil and soilless mixes, and one 1954 article sounds suspiciously like what we today call "Texas potting." Cultural problems came in many forms, from bud blast, to thrips, to fungi. One of my favorite titles of an article was "*Crown Rot ... or What?*" Whatever the problem, THE GLOXINIAN was the place to find the answers.

Many plants other than Florist Gloxinias were grown and written about—episcias were extremely popular and J.B. Reark of Fantastic Gardens frequently introduced new cultivars such as *Episcia lilacina* var. 'Mrs. Fanny Haage,' named in honor of his wife's grandmother. Interestingly to me, it was

exactly at this point in time that, as an eight year old child, I was sitting at my grandmother's kitchen table in Indiana, eating cookies after school, and admiring the "flame violet" that she grew in her east kitchen window, full of bright orange flowers and dark velvety leaves. I had my priorities, even then ....

Elvin and Peggie and Vera Dillard and Al Buell and many others not only wrote for THE GLOXINIAN but also produced a steady stream of articles in other magazines, such as *Horticulture* and *Popular Gardening*. They spoke frequently to garden clubs all over the world about growing gloxinias and other plants. Peggie Schulz's 1953 book, *Gesneriads and How to Grow Them*, was the only such publication, and an absolute must for every grower. The first AGS chapter formed was the Chicago Gloxinia Society in 1953. Two Kansas City chapters were soon to follow, and within a year or so, the South African Gloxinia Society. Meetings were usually in people's homes and programs were sometimes just reading a chapter from Peggie's book, or "How I Spent My Summer Vacation ... visiting somebody's collection of Gloxinias!" Many members propagated their plants for exchange or sale because there were few commercial growers of such specialty plants, other than gloxinias. Elvin frequently traveled to meetings and made a point of knowing everyone, and being known by everyone. His journalistic style of creating a whirlwind of facts and ideas in the readers' minds worked to perfection. In July of 1953 he announced that Paul Arnold was gathering material on the little known genus *Achimenes* and anyone with information should contact him. At the same time, Poncho Harrison in Mexico was working on an *achimenes* article, and ... by the way, if you happened to be in Hawaii, Bill Sutton, the head gardener at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, invited any AGS member to stop by and visit. The seventh AVSA convention reported ten *episcias* and four gloxinias, not a very good showing in Elvin's mind. He had become the "Gloxinia Connection." The pages of THE GLOXINIAN were an endless source of fact and entertainment that left the reader in breathless anticipation of the next issue.

When Peggie Schulz wrote a guide to growing 25 different gesneriads, she consulted heavily with Dr. Moore to get the names correct. She regarded these 25 gesneriads as being among the 110 known species of 85 genera. Today we estimate 3700 species and 147 genera in the family. It seemed then that some of the botanical names were getting straightened out; however, there was also a discussion about using only popular names in order to attract the public. Montague Free suggested in 1954 that *Episcias* be known as "Pixies."

Peggie Schulz wrote some excellent articles on hybridizing and introduced her new *×Gloxinera rosea* var. 'Rosebells.' It was the first of many such "intergeneric" hybrids between *Sinningia* and *Reichsteineria*. In 1955 our armchair explorer, Florence Carrell, explained that she had been collecting gesneriad seed since 1946 from Austin Smith in Costa Rica and regularly supplied Dr. Moore so that she, and he, could get the names straightened out. Meanwhile she was writing to friends in New Zealand for seed of *Rhabdothermus solandri* and confessed that she wondered if "*Stroxinia*" was really anything other than a slipper gloxinia. She sent another of her collectors to find a yellow-flowered tussacia in Central America—he couldn't find it, but her Panama collector sent seed initially identified as *Alloplectus*

*schlimii* and "now one of our members, Mr. Dale Denham of Boulder, CO has definitely established that this plant is actually *Tussacia friedrichsthaliana* or *Chrysothemis friedrichsthaliana*." She notes that "the flowers are short-lived but hybridizers overlook such shortcomings, and, the African violet growers are looking to get some yellow into their hybrids. This may be the answer." (*This point was illustrated in the presentation by a slide on loan from the Smithsonian Institution, photographed and with a handwritten label by Dr. Dale Denham, 1955.*)

PEG, as Peggie Schulz had become known in her column called "Seasonally Yours", introduced *Sinningia pusilla* saying—"it looks too fragile to touch." She also explained that *Sinningia maximiliana* is now *Sinningia eumorpha*. Alfred Byrd Graf, author of *Exotica* (yet to be released), introduced in the pages of THE GLOXINIAN a new gesneriad called "Brazilian Edelweiss." He had discovered it in the window of a florist shop in São Paulo; it was thought to be a corytholoma or rechsteineria and was known locally as "Queen of the Cliffs." This plant caused quite a lot of excitement at the International Flower Show in New York and was later officially described and published in the pages of THE GLOXINIAN by Conrad Morton of the Smithsonian as *Rechsteineria leucotricha*.

In 1955, the Gulf Coast Gloxinia Society with Jack Sweet was on TV in Florida. In THE GLOXINIAN, Peggie Schulz devised a registration form and criteria for registering "gloxinias of horticulture and other gesneriads with the exception of saintpaulias." This included a point system for judging. Paul Arnold was later to announce that this system was invalid since it wasn't consistent with the system for International Registrar that appeared later, in 1956. How astute of Ms. Schulz and her committee to recognize a need for registration and guidelines for naming new hybrids.

In 1954, The American Gloxinia Society was incorporated and bylaws were finally published. The executive board consisted of the editor, co-editor and assistant editor and ... officers currently in office. They, in turn, elected the president, vice president and secretary-treasurer—a unique form of democracy, but ... it worked. The first financial statement showed about \$600 in the bank. The first president's message was a farewell from the first president, Vera Dillard, and the second was a welcome by President F. W. Mitchell who listed among his objectives for the future ... yellow gloxinias and African violets, orchid-shaped gloxinias and to "get the taxonomy cleared up." Names you might recognize from the 1957 membership roster included Dale Denham, Michael Kartuz, Lyndon Lyon, Elena Jordan, Harold Epstein, Irwin Rosenblum, 41 members from Canada and 36 international members.

If you thought that John Boggan fabricated the existence of "fragrant gesneriads" a few years ago, there is an article on fragrant gloxinias by Sister Teresita in May 1957. Fragrance of other gesneriads was often mentioned by Peggie Schulz and in 1959, new member Michael Kartuz of New York wrote a letter to the editor to say that he detected a faint fragrance in his gesneriads, but he had told no one except his mother about it.

In 1957 MacMillan released *African violets, Gloxinias and Their Relatives*, by Harold E. Moore Jr., with illustrations by Marion Ruff Sheehan. It cost a hefty \$10, but was filled with information and wonderful line drawings and color illustrations, reported by all to be well worth the price. Dr. Moore autographed books at the 1957 International Flower Show in New

York, while Al Buell sold gloxinias upstairs, and an information booth for the American Gloxinia Society was staffed by Paul Arnold, President Will Mitchell, Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Thompson (he would later become president), Jean Boggs of Nashville (editor of *The Gesneriad Journal* for the newly revived American Gesneria Society) and Irwin Rosenblum (future Editor of *The Gloxinian*, frequent contributor of articles and future organizer of the Greater New York Chapter). 150,000 people attended the show.

Albert and Trudy Buell hosted the 1957 annual convention in Eastford, Connecticut. Speakers came from Cornell, visits were made to the University of Connecticut and Al Buell guaranteed 20,000 blooming plants. The Sunday agenda began with a church service. Mr. Buell delivered all that he promised.

Bruce Thompson became the President in 1958. The membership roster included Florence Messick (later to become editor of *THE GLOXINIAN*) and Mrs. Joseph D. Batcheller of New Hampshire. Ernesta Ballard wrote a number of excellent articles for *THE GLOXINIAN*. Mrs. Ballard became the Director of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and the Philadelphia Flower Show and published a wonderful book, *Garden In Your House*. I recall my first visit to a Philadelphia Flower Show in the 1980's where I recall her competitive exhibit of a small bonsai growing on a large flat rock with a miniature *Sinningia pusilla* blooming under the tree. Mrs. Ballard was a blue-ribbon grower.

Back to 1958, Elvin is married, living in New York, and is the editor of *Flower and Garden*. Their apartment is on the top floor; it has no furniture but excellent windows and light for plants. Edith McDonald becomes the Secretary-Treasurer and seems to handle the publications orders, among other things. The McDonalds host a meeting in their apartment for 18 AGS members who might be interested in starting a chapter. Another meeting is scheduled for January of 1959 and announced in the *NY Times*; 48 people attend, not in the McDonald's apartment. An April meeting is held at the New York Botanical Garden; 60 people attend and the Greater New York Chapter was born. Al Buell spoke on "Growing Gloxinias to Perfection." It was noted, "Mr. Buell exhibited considerable stamina in answering questions for over two hours." Gloxinia seedlings were given to all members and 15 plants of *Rechsteineria leucotricha* were distributed. The lecture and meeting were meticulously recorded in the handwritten notes of Diantha Brown.

In 1959 and '60, Elvin got busy ... busier than usual, he had a baby. He enlisted the help of a managing editor and welcomed Elaine Cherry as advertising manager (she would soon become the editor). Peggie Schulz completed another book—*How to Make Money from your Home Greenhouse*. Michael Kartuz became associate editor of *THE GLOXINIAN* and wrote many articles for the magazine about growing new plants, such as *Trichantha minor*, as well as cultural articles on everything from bud blast and potting mixes to growing in a greenhouse. Maude Cogswell also contributed many fine articles and noted that her pentarhaphia turned out to be a *Gesneria cuneifolia* according to Dr. Moore ... her *Lysionotus serratus* bloomed and although she was disappointed in the flowers, she noted that the roots got very fleshy almost like a bulb or a fat kohleria rhizome, and ... that a mole ate her *Loxostigma griffithii*.

The 1961 membership roster listed Charles Marvinny (later to become president), Adele Zemansky (later to become treasurer), Miriam Goldberg, Joan Faust, Jim Wyrzten, Mrs. Charles Webster, Mrs. Erastus Corning II,

Charles Marden Fitch, and Dr. Thomas Talpey of Puerto Rico (later to become president), among others.

I'm going to skip the next 40 years in chronological detail, but certainly not in content. The unwritten chapters of this history exist in the minds of everyone who was ever a member. The major contributions of people such as Carl Clayberg, Albert Buell, Bob Lee, Cornelius Ackerson, Paul DeChenes, Michael Kartuz, Miriam Denham, Frances Batcheller, Irwin Rosenblum and many others really demand their own chapter. The importance of this brief recollection, however, is to remind us that the mobility and purpose of this organization were extremely well founded during those first ten years. Over the past 50 years, presidents and other officers have come and gone ... some of them really good and some ... less so. The officers probably reflect the ambience of the times more than a response to any grand plan for botanical peace in the world. Our better officers have been those who responded to the needs of the members and never lost site of the fact that they were themselves members with the same interests and purpose. Our editors have been the most stable members of our organization. It was necessary—they had deadlines! THE GLOXINIAN is the consistent communication among our members. Our magazine is the voice of the novice, the professional, the horticulturist, the taxonomist, the propagator, the industry, the hybridizer, the botanist, the collector, the traveler, the grower of gesneriads. We are forever indebted to the editors of THE GLOXINIAN.

We are fortunate that technology has provided us with an additional tool for communication—the Internet. The AGGS web site has exposed us to over 100,000 people. Our enhanced ability to convey education and conduct business via the Internet was unimagined 50 years ago. David Turley is certainly the wizard at the end of our yellow brick road. Gesneriphiles, the Internet discussion group mothered by Norah Otto, is so heavily utilized that it is difficult to keep up with. Someone recently posted an accounting of those individuals who had posted the greatest quantity of messages to the list—I will not enumerate, but I do wonder when they possibly have time to water their gloxinias!!!

I am not attempting to review the history of AGGS Shows and Judging at this time. We have seen from the origination of Peggie Schulz and her committee to implement judging standards for gloxinias that, when a need arose, it was answered. Many members pursued the task of devising a structure and method for objective flower show procedures. Among them were Al Buell, Bruce Thompson, Olive and Bill Hull, Jim Wyrzten, Frances Batcheller and Ben Paternoster. It is another one of those evolving processes which no single person invented, but collectively. The AGGS method of competitive flower show judging is copied rigorously by other horticultural societies and major flower shows, because ... it works. It works because of the knowledge behind each judge and the objectivity of the method. Indeed, the world thanks Frances and Ben and their long line of predecessors for their dynamic contributions.

There has never been any doubt as to the value of the AGGS Seed Fund, and it was a delight to see the energy and enthusiasm of Florence Carrell renewed in Maryjane Evans. Maryjane rebuilt the Seed Fund from a few offerings to nearly 700 species and hybrids, an invaluable resource utilized by most botanical gardens worldwide, as well as a major attraction to new growers and members. Bob and Carol Connelly and Maryjane will remind

me, to remind you, that we must never forget that this Seed Fund is an exchange and the viability of the fund depends on each member of AGGS as its resource. It must never falter.

When the American Gloxinia Society was 3 years old, the membership was over 2000. The profile and numbers of our members have changed considerably, but the most interesting demographic over the 50-year period is the diversity of the growers and enthusiasts. I have been asked why we retain the word "American" in the name of our society when in fact we are so international. I reply, "Because—that is where we started, in the Americas." I cringe when someone uses the term "foreign members." Foreign to me means "strange," and if our membership is strange, then I am proud to count myself among them. AGGS membership and participation has always been without continental or national boundaries. One of our first chapters was in South Africa and our current largest chapter is in Sweden, thanks to the efforts of a woman who has single-handedly reforested the botanical gardens and homes of all Scandinavia—Ingrid Lindskog. The minor barrier of language seems of little importance in a world of Latin binomials, and I'm sure that Arleen Dewell would like nothing better than to welcome new chapters in Japan, Australia, Great Britain, or any other part of the world. Our society has always represented a "meeting of the minds"; a collaboration of scientists, horticulturalists and hobbyists, we have never been a society of "amateurs." It bothers me when I visit the New England Flower Show where the entire horticultural competition is labeled—Amateur Horticulture. Such fine efforts deserve higher recognition.

When I became business manager in 1982, we were struggling each year to balance the budget, to pay the escalating printing costs of the magazine, not to lose money on conventions and a lot of other similar financial concerns. When I became president, I decided that maybe I should use the "power" to improve that situation. We obtained 501(c)3 status from the Internal Revenue Service so that contributions to AGGS could be tax deductible for individuals. Then I invited our then-treasurer Nellie Sleeth up to a revolving cocktail lounge with velvet wall-covering and beaded lampshades. After a good stiff drink, I timidly proposed the idea of establishing an endowment fund. She responded, "We should have done that a long time ago!" Not only did she embrace the idea, she already knew where the seed money would come from and exactly how it might work. All we needed was a "Frances Batcheller," and a Molly Schneider to develop the program for fund-raising. All parties graciously complied, the board approved, and they truly altered the course of AGGS. Molly and Doris, and everyone who has ever contributed to the Frances Batcheller Endowment Fund, have accomplished a major feat in the future of this organization. You have afforded us the luxury of imagining a better time and place. Last year your board of directors was so impressed by the possibilities that an endowment fund affords that they provided a financial endowment to the Elvin McDonald Research Fund whereby the gains from the capital in that fund will provide a continual source of funding for research projects each year in the future.

You ask me what I want for this organization, what do I see for the future? I see a day when instead of worrying about the cost of dues to our members we can say "Anyone who wants to grow gesneriads—come join us." I see a day when we continue to publish the highest quality magazine of any such organization in existence without worrying about the cost of the paper it is

printed on. I see a day when we can distribute our educational message, whether via THE GLOXINIAN or the Internet, to the entire world. I see a day when we can spend our time determining which, or how many, of the worthy research projects AGGS should fund. I see a day when our endowment and research funds can support our dreams. This day is not so far away. We all just need to go home and make sure that there is a bequest included in our wills for AGGS ... as well as for the family poodle and the nephew who doesn't even know how to spell GESNEROID. Your foresight will afford the future of the American Gloxinia and Gesneriad Society.

The purpose of my research into the history of this society was to uncover the motivation of our originators. What I found was a complex evolution of resources that only had a beginning. The American Gloxinia and Gesneriad Society, as we know it this day, will change tomorrow—it will change with the addition of every piece of knowledge, it will change with every new issue of THE GLOXINIAN, it will change with the addition of every new member, it will change with the creation of every new hybrid, it will change with the production of every new seed capsule—it will change and evolve.

You ask me about the future of our society? I can only tell you that the future is excitingly unimaginable—like discovering a new species, or anticipating the opening of a new flower bud, or germinating a new seed. I look forward to sharing that adventure with you.



2001 Kansas City Convention attendees – photo by Julie Mavity-Hudson