

IN MEMORIAM:
MICHEL (MIKE) GEORGES DESIRE LELONG (20 MARCH 1932–15 JUNE 2020)

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Marilyn Lelong, friend and wife of Mike Lelong for 60 years

Dr. Michel (“Mike”) Georges Desire Lelong was born in Casablanca and raised in North Africa. After immigrating to Louisiana, and after serving honorably in the US Army during the Korean War, he became a naturalized citizen of the United States. He discovered a fascination with plants, attended Northwestern University in Natchitoches and earned his PhD from Iowa State University. A renowned and esteemed Professor of Botany, he taught at the University of South Alabama for 36 years earning Professor Emeritus status. He had a brilliant mind, a gentle nature, an amazingly expansive vocabulary, and a fantastic sense of humor. He gave generously of his time for many worthy causes and was a founding member of the Mobile Botanical Gardens.

When Mike was in the field, he was so absorbed that pictures were not an option; I’m including one of my few field photos and favorites. The field was his “happy place.” And it is where our children remember as being good times when they were young. Weekends were spent in the car with a cooler full of cold water, and off we would go as Mike learned of new plants and places to explore. He was unaware that snakes or animals might be there too. The woods are still a healing place for us. The family adored him as a husband, father, outdoor field trip leader, teacher of life lessons and best friend.

He always enjoyed being with his botany colleagues. The meetings of the botany group in Alabama that we went to were anticipated with pleasure. Thank you, Brian Keener and thank you, Barney Lipscomb for doing this.

Bob Shipp, University of South Alabama

Mike Lelong was from the old school in the best sense of its meaning. He was a stickler for flawless grammar and detail, demanding nothing but the same from his students. The irony is he was so French that his accent, never lessened, would seem in conflict with his written English.

His passion for botany was powerfully infective. A field drip with Mike revealed his personal relationship with most every tree along the way (“look at you, you big mother.”) By the time the pathway was finished every student had a feeling and love for his “babies.”

One caveat about Mike revealed his passion for perfection, although unfortunately it involved the cruelest of sports, golf. Mike played often and set personal goals. He must break 50 on the front nine, which he rarely did. Failing this, he refused to allow himself the celebratory beer, and would sit at the bar with the rest of us, as if he had committed a mortal sin.

Mike was the consummate botanist. To know him was to know the scientist totally devoted to knowledge and discovery. He will be missed by any and all who were fortunate enough to share his passion.

Brian R. Keener, The University of West Alabama (UWAL)

Perhaps Dr. Michel Lelong will be most widely remembered for his work in grass taxonomy, particularly in the genera *Panicum* and *Dichanthelium*. However, it is possible that Dr. Lelong’s most lasting legacy, at least regionally, was through his discoveries and collections from extreme southern Alabama. In the late 1960s, he joined

the faculty at the newly created University of South Alabama in Mobile. This appointment afforded him the opportunity to become a resident botanist in the outer coastal plain of Alabama, a residency not duplicated since the time of Charles Mohr in the late 1800s. Dr. Lelong was able visit the natural environs of Baldwin and Mobile counties long before the massive developments and habitat destruction of today's time took place. He made the most of this opportunity by doing what he loved, exploring, collecting, and building the herbarium he established at the University South Alabama (USAM). From these activities he helped to greatly expand our current knowledge of the botanically unpredictable Alabama flora. There are over 6,300 specimens collected by Dr. Lelong in the Alabama Plant Atlas (floraofalabama.org) which are mainly curated at the USAM Herbarium with duplicates at other institutions. His specimens include many first state records, rediscovered species that had not been seen since the 1800s, and in some cases, the last known record from the state. These specimens prove invaluable for me and others as research continues into the plant biodiversity of Alabama. I am thankful for the opportunity to have spent some time with Dr. Lelong when we were working as coauthors on the *Annotated Checklist of the Vascular Plants of Alabama* (Kral et al. 2011), the first comprehensive list for our state in over 100 years. He was one of our wise elder statesmen during this project and an absolute joy to be around. The expertise and professionalism he brought to the table were extremely admirable and commanded deep respect from all of the coauthors. He will be missed.

Robert W. Freckmann, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

I met Michel Lelong in 1962 when I arrived at Iowa State University as one of Richard Pohl's graduate students. Mike had been working for about two years on the taxonomy of *Dichantheium*, at that time regarded as a sub-genus of *Panicum*, for his dissertation. All Dr. Pohl's graduate students knew when they arrived that they were going to work on some grass genus to be determined by him. He decided that Mike and I should divide *Dichantheium* between us. Because Mike had several years of field experience with the very difficult hairy species, he agreed to concentrate on those, leaving the relatively easier ones for me.

Mike knew much more about *Dichantheium* at that time than I did. No one could have been more patient and helpful than Mike as I tried to learn the existing taxonomy of the group along with his insights. In May 1963 we took a three-week field trip in the southern states to study and collect specimens. One of our first stops was at a cut-over woods in northern Arkansas where we collected 15 taxa (as circumscribed by Hitchcock and Chase) plus putative hybrids of *Dichantheium*. That stop alone impressed me with how difficult a taxonomic revision of the group would be and how well Mike knew them.

Mike and I made many field trips together over the years, collecting well over 1,000 numbers of *Dichantheium* together. We corresponded extensively, keeping-up with recent work and discussing our changing taxonomic conclusions. Our perspectives were somewhat different. I have spent most of my field time in the northern states where there are fewer species and less hybridization and Mike more time in the South where innumerable microspecies form an intergrading reticulum. When we collaborated on our treatments of *Panicum* and *Dichantheium* for volume 25 of *Flora of North America*, we compromised on treating taxa that can be distinct in part of the range and intergrading in another by designating them as subspecies.

Working together with Mike had always been among of the most enjoyable professional experiences I have ever had.

Barney Lipscomb, Botanical Research Institute of Texas

Mike Lelong was a friend, colleague, and a longtime subscriber and supporter of *Sida* and of *JBRIT*. His first paper in *Sida* was in 1977 (*Annotated List of Vascular Plants in Mobile, Alabama*, Vol. 7(2):118–146). I was then assistant editor working alongside Wm. F. Mahler, editor. Mike not only submitted manuscripts to *Sida* and *JBRIT* but he was always willing to give back by contributing detailed and timely reviews of submissions from colleagues. He was a thorough but kind reviewer! A good and faithful servant he was, to family and to colleagues.

To the Lelong family, it is a pleasure for *JBRIT* to recognize, honor, and remember Dr. Michel (Mike) Lelong, a dear friend, colleague, and member of the botanical community. Thank you for sharing him with us!