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Bulbs For Central Florida Gardens

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Daffodils Blooming Year After Year? Sounds Daffy, But Tests Indicate Bulbs Could Become The New Low-maintenance Favorite Of Planters.

February 1, 2003 | By Sarah Kinbar, Special to the Sentinel

Chances are you haven't seen many daffodils about town, but they're here, blooming secretly in the gardens of some knowledgeable Central Florida gardeners.

When winter draws to a close, bits of green poke up from the ground. Soon buds emerge from bulbous forms hiding underground. A burst of color from an early spring-blooming bulb such as the daffodil dazzles the eye, often outshining other perennials in the ornamental border.

An amaryllis forced indoors has become a tradition during the holidays, but the expense and the effort of using bulbs as annuals in the garden have long frustrated even the most dedicated gardeners in the South.

There is a third option for those who would grow bulbs: Some will bloom perennially in Central Florida's subtropical climate.

Local enthusiasts have the data -- and the daffodils -- to prove it.

Robert H. Stamps, a researcher with the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences in Apopka, takes the scientific approach.

Stamps first became interested in leading a study on bulbs when daffodils bloomed in his yard year after year -- for 20 years. The variety? *Narcissus Carlton*, the world's best-selling daffodil.

"I expected daffodil bulbs to need a longer, colder winter than Apopka could offer," says Stamps. "I was amazed when the daffodils perennialized."

Studies on bulbs are more applicable to homeowners than commercial growers, and because Stamps is a commercial cut-foilage specialist for the state, bulb testing is a side project for him. The studies have been facilitated by people who already had an interest in bulb gardening.

"The late John Van Beck, former president of the Florida Daffodil Society, donated the bulbs for the most recent study. Brent and Becky Heath donated bulbs for the first study," Stamps says.

The Heaths, third-generation bulb growers and daffodil hybridizers in Gloucester, Va., own Brent and Becky's Bulbs.

Inspired by circumstances in his own yard, Stamps has been testing the bulbs in a series of outdoor 16-square-foot testing beds at the Mid-Florida Research and Education Center to learn which ones thrive in Central Florida.

Stamps has cultivated various bulbs under precise conditions, controlling every aspect of the plants' growing conditions: soil type, pH level, percentage of light and shade, watering and temperature. As many as 30 cultivars have been included in each study.

Stamps says the growing conditions of each study mimic the conditions of the local region, allowing him to offer results that Central Florida gardeners can duplicate.

Each plant and each bloom has a tag on which Stamps records planting date, blooming dates, number of flowers and length of bloom, which in turn are tracked in a database.

Stamps has published his results in the proceedings of the Florida State Horticultural Society, which disseminates information to local extension agents.

BOOK ON BULBS

In another test garden several counties northeast of Apopka, the Flagler County Extension Service is giving bulbs the "cold shoulder."

"In Bunnell, the test gardens are exposed to real elements of nature," says Linda Van Beck, Florida Daffodil Society president and widow of the former president.

The bulbs, which in this case are all daffodils, have been neglected for the most part, rarely even watered.

"That may sound terrible, but based on the results from that garden, we know how certain bulbs behave in Central Florida when left to their own devices," says Van Beck of Tallahassee.

She doesn't test bulbs herself. In fact, she isn't a gardener. It's the mystery of the plant and the explorations of scientists that excite her. She is writing a book, as yet untitled, detailing the habits and history of daffodils

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in North Florida's Zone 8.

The chapters address a range of topics relevant to growing daffodils. Practical tips, such as which watering methods daffodils respond to best, draw on Van Beck's years of bulb observation.

"As soon as the bulbs flower, stop watering. Since they aren't taking up water at that point, watering the plants will result in a pool of water that could rot the bulb."

Van Beck's advice is reliable, based on comprehensive research that includes observations of daffodils growing in hundreds of locations in the state. Van Beck is somewhat of a plant historian, too, and is writing a chapter on Florida's daffodil heritage.

"Few people know that at a point in time, the world's largest daffodil nursery was located in Alachua," she says.

Late in the book, Van Beck's educated speculations point to the future of daffodil growing, a future Van Beck hopes to influence through her writings.

For example, bulb viruses could compromise the success of daffodil growing in the South if gardeners aren't careful to avoid them. Van Beck's advice: "Buy from reputable catalogs and nurseries with high standards. These are the sources for virus-free bulbs. Be picky."

One chapter of the book addresses Central Florida Zone 9 daffodil gardening.

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Van Beck looks to the Bunnell test gardens as a resource. Apparently, results from the Bunnell test gardens counter conventional wisdom about daffodils.

"Daffodils are very particular. It seems that they get a feel for their location in the fall, and decide whether they are going to bloom in spring. The contractile root of a daffodil shrinks back in unfavorable conditions," Van Beck says.

BLOOM BOOM

Considering this, it is amazing that out of 30 varieties that were planted, eight grow as perennials, returning year after year, despite extreme drought conditions and a single fertilization each year as the bulbs began to sprout.

Ruth Micieli of the Flagler County Extension Service describes the test gardens she oversees as "very close to natural conditions."

In October 1998, she and her volunteers planted a set of donated bulbs like the ones that Stamps planted in Apopka.

"We covered the beds with pine straw in spring and summer to prevent evaporation of water and weed growth. We did weed consistently and also hand watered during the worst times of drought," Micieli says.

The daffodils that survived and thrived were the same daffodils Stamps had success with, only this time plant care was more minimal and record keeping less precise.

"We're starting over this year with a new group of volunteers, and we plan to record results from the garden more carefully," Micieli says.

Still, the results from her previous studies affirm what Stamps has also concluded.

"There are bulbs that Central Florida gardeners can expect will bloom year after year."

If we take our cues from the test gardens of the Flagler County Extension Service, bulbs could become the new low-maintenance favorite.