

Daffodil Growers, Start Your Engines

By BRADFORD MCKEE APRIL 12, 2001

The hall where the daffodil jockeys were doing final primping was emergency-room tense. With minutes to go, they labored to make their daffodils salute the judges at perfect 90 degree angles from the stems. Clay Higgins of Gaithersburg, Md., poked a half-awake bloom in the nose and blew on it slightly to coax it open.

In practical terms, the daffodil is the self-cleaning oven of the gardening world. This irrepressible beacon of spring needs almost no care. Even the most cursed gardeners can throw daffodil bulbs into a 4- to 6-inch-deep hole in the fall, cover them up, fly south for the winter and come back to a flush of colors, from the shining February Gold to the fragrant white cheeks of Actaea in May.

The Miss America Pageants of the daffodil world started this year on March 10 in Clinton, Miss., and will end on May 5 in Peterborough, N.H.; a similar competitive circuit thrives in the Midwest and the West. (The American Daffodil Society, with 1,200 members worldwide, held its national convention in Louisville, Ky., on April 5.)

Given that the flowers essentially come out of the ground perfect, the first rule is to preserve what's there, even though only cut flowers are entered in shows. Competitors protect specimens from the rain with paper bags, or rig little parasols to prevent the sun from bleaching them. And then there's the precompetition cleaning.

There were about 1,175 daffodils (genus *Narcissus*) being shown here today by 105 daffodil fanatics. In the gymnasium of Page Middle School stood the judges. Three of them, Ann Corson, Betty Smith and Jane Viele, collectively have more than 100 years' experience judging daffodils. One of their first stops around the room was at three starlike blossoms with translucent white petals surrounding pale yellow trumpets.

Mrs. Viele leaned in to inspect the identification tag. "Pearly Queen!" she announced. "I have not seen Pearly Queen in 20 years."

"I think it's almost historic," Mrs. Corson said. "Can you look it up?" Mrs. Viele flipped through her daffodil index as Mrs. Smith looked on.

"Pearly Queen, 1927," Mrs. Smith said, referring to the year the bulb joined the American Daffodil Society register. The flower was standing at attention with no brown spots or nicks in

the petals.

"We give it a blue," Mrs. Viele said. A clerk, who had watched the judging with the gravity of a United Nations human-rights observer, marked the ID tag for a blue ribbon.

"When I first got to Gloucester nine years ago, I thought a daffodil was a daffodil," said Pat Zima, a Connecticut transplant who was chairwoman of this year's show for the Garden Club of Gloucester. "But look at this," she added, indicating flowers that were to her as different as dachshunds, German shepherds and mastiffs.

Judges rate the flowers on a point system for their condition, form, substance, color, pose, stem and size. A separate category for miniature daffodils uses the same criteria, plus extra scrutiny for "charm." Each bloom in the show falls into one of the official classes designated by Britain's Royal Horticultural Society. So contenders are separated into groups like yellow perianth (or petals), yellow cup; white perianth, pink in cup; white perianth, yellow in cup, no orange or red, and so on. There were 145 classes at this show, guaranteeing plenty of blue ribbons.

The Royal Horticultural Society recognizes 26,000 registered hybrids of daffodils, and the judges must be able to differentiate the subtle differences. The American Daffodil Society, based in Columbus, Ohio, prescribes three years of apprenticeship for judges. Marjorie Masek of Gloucester, the lone trainee here this year, studiously accompanied Catherine Gillespie of Orange, Va., and Joan George of Baltimore.

"Can you touch the flower?" Mrs. Masek asked, as they surveyed three blooms entered under "white perianth, orange or red in cup."

"No," Mrs. Gillespie replied. "You can pick up the vase, but you can't touch the flower."

When the judging was over, four major awards -- plus the award for the most blue ribbons in the show -- went to Petie Matheson, a co-organizer of the event. Mrs. Matheson, who lives in Gloucester, has been showing daffodils since 1984.

Some experienced judges may work as many as 10 shows on the daffodil circuit. "You get the yellow fever, and you just can't help it," said Evelyn Nock, a judge from Quinby, Va.

"And our husbands just suffer," added Mrs. Corson.

If judicial spouses twitch, contestants around the country are turning manic around now, as the shows draw near, especially when the weather does not cooperate. Trina Waldron, who is organizing the daffodil show in Shelter Island, N.Y., on April 21, complained about the cold. "People are asking me already, 'Are we going to have daffodils in time?' And, of course, I say, 'Absolutely,' with as much confidence as I can possibly muster."

This is the weekend for Charles Brush, a retired archaeologist in Manhattan, to head to his Shelter Island home to check on his blooms for the local show, which he'll enter with his daughter Dr. Karen Brush, also an archaeologist. After Shelter Island, they'll head to the New England Regional show in Greenwich, Conn. "I'm a somewhat competitive guy," offered Dr. Brush, who is 78. "I'm a mountain climber, but I have heart failure. So I found daffodils. What

is nice is that you put them in the ground and there isn't a thing you can do about them until spring."

But being a competitive guy, he will also take matters into his own hands. This year, because daffodils are shy of the cold (though bulbs generally stay hardy to minus 30 degrees), he may bring them indoors under bright lights to force them open. (If it is too warm, he might mist them and keep them in a frost-free refrigerator to keep them from an early climax.) And some competitive measures run even more extreme.

Karen Brush noted that if necessary they will put a flower in traction, hanging it on a string by the neck until stem and flower are perpendicular. "You want a perfect blossom," she said.

Of course, many think that the daffodils sprouting in parks and on lawns across the country are all perfect, each in its fashion. But some -- call them judges -- are more discerning than that.

"We're looking for perfection, of course," said Mrs. Viele in Gloucester, "but there isn't any such thing."

Blooming Soon

SEVERAL shows will round out daffodil season in the Northeast.

SHELTER ISLAND, N.Y. -- April 21; (631) 749-1935.

NEW ENGLAND REGIONAL SHOW -- Greenwich Conn.: April 26-27; (203) 661-6142.

NANTUCKET, MASS. -- April 28-29; (508) 325-7790.

PETERBOROUGH, N.H. -- May 4-5; (603) 563-7176.

Other shows are listed on the Web page of the AMERICAN DAFFODIL SOCIETY
www.daffodilusa.org.

Correction: April 19, 2001

A listing last Thursday with an article about daffodil shows included erroneous dates from the American Daffodil Society for the New England Regional Show in Greenwich, Conn. It will be held on April 25 and 26, not 26 and 27.

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