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Narcissus signals the arrival of a new year

By Greg Grant, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Jan 2, 2019 Updated 18 hrs ago

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Narcissus x italicus is one of the first *Narcissus* to bloom each year. (Courtesy)

My paperwhites (*Narcissus papyraceus*), *Narcissus x italicus* and dainty little *Narcissus cantabricus* are in bloom. Perhaps no floral symbol epitomizes the impending arrival of a new year as does the blooming of our assorted *Narcissus* species.

The word *Narcissus* is derived from the Greek word *narke*, meaning numbness or stupor. Some attribute the naming of the flower to its narcotic fragrance while others debate that it is associated with the poisonous nature of the bulbs, a built in defense against nibbling rodents. In classical mythology it was the young lad

Narcissus who was so enamored with himself that he stared at his reflection in a pool of water until he eventually turned into his namesake flower. I've been in a stupor for them all my life as well.

Most Narcissus species are natives of southern France, Spain and the surrounding Mediterranean areas. This explains their love of our dry summers and wet winters. Many species of Narcissus have been cultivated for hundreds, even thousands of years.

What's the difference between jonquils, narcissus and daffodils? It's an age-old question. Botanically speaking, they're all different species of the genus Narcissus. To the average gardener, however, the differences are fairly distinct.

The common name Narcissus usually refers to the early blooming, white, powerfully fragrant, cluster flowered cultivars of Narcissus tazetta and its kin. This includes, but is not limited to, what we commonly call paperwhites (Narcissus papyraceus). Heavy blooming stands of paperwhites are limited to areas near the coast or other protected microclimates due to their extremely early bloom time (often as early as Thanksgiving and Christmas). They are common here, too, but often have their blooms frozen and their foliage nipped.

Narcissus x italicus, an old natural hybrid between a paperwhite and a tazetta Narcissus, is also frequently encountered. It has slightly twisted creamy white flowers and a pale yellow cup. Like all Narcissus, it blooms best during a mild winter, generally from mid-January to mid-February. Throughout the rest of the state the most common form encountered is Narcissus tazetta "Grand Primo." Its widespread adaptability is due to the fact that it's the latest blooming Narcissus, usually between mid-February and early March. It has big bold clusters of powerfully sweet, creamy-white blossoms, which make excellent cut flowers. All Narcissus have wide flattened, green foliage with the exception of paperwhites, which are blue-gray.

Without exception, the best types of Narcissus for perennializing and naturalizing are the early blooming species and hybrids. In addition to their early bloom, they tend to be small flowered. This early bloom (January through March) ensures that the foliage can mature before mowing begins or hot weather sets in, which kills the foliage prematurely. It's extremely critical for successful perennialization or naturalization that the foliage be allowed to grow, mature and ripen naturally. This means it should never be cut off or tied in cute little knots, as each year's foliage stores up the food reserves for the next year's bloom.

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