

***Narcissus triandrus* in the Wild**

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Apart from a group of French islands which will be mentioned later, all forms of *Narcissus triandrus* come exclusively from mainland Spain and Portugal. Popularly known as Angel's Tears, they are dainty plants characterised by their drooping flowers held at an acute angle to the stem, with strongly reflexed petals and goblet or bell shaped cups. It is the only species in the genus *Narcissus* which retains this poise as the seed ripens. All the others straighten up so that the seed capsule points to the sky.

Classification

Botanically, *Narcissus* is subdivided into ten Sections. *N. triandrus* is the only representative of Section Ganymedes. Over the years botanists have kept making attempts to provide a classification which would meet with general approval, but *triandrus* has been particularly difficult and further changes may yet be necessary. To illustrate the problem, the authors of the Royal Horticultural Society's *Dictionary of Gardening* (1992) expressed the opinion that *triandrus* is "probably best treated as a single variable species: many variants have been described, based on flower colour, number of flowers and size of floral parts, but these do not seem to be reliable field characteristics". However, with so many names in circulation this easy solution is unlikely to appeal to gardeners so I will try to explain the point to which botanists have led us.

According to the RHS *International Daffodil Register and Classified List 1998*, *N. triandrus* is divided into two subspecies, *N. triandrus* subsp. *triandrus* and *N. triandrus* subsp. *pallidulus* s. The first is subdivided into four "varieties" (in the botanical sense), var. *triandrus*, var. *concolor*, var. *pulchellus* and var. *loiseleurii*.

Var. *triandrus*

Var. *triandrus* is the largest variety. It has leaves as much as 5mm wide, flat on the inner surface and sometimes coiled at the outer end. The stems are comparatively stout, up to 30cm or even more, and with as many as six or exceptionally seven flowers. The petals are white or whitish, often with a pale yellow median streak, most noticeable when in bud, which can make a whole group look slightly yellow. Occasionally one sees plants or groups of plants which are

more uniformly very pale yellow. Three of the anthers are exerted beyond the corona. The other three are included within. Interestingly, the style can be either exerted or included. Var. *triandrus* grows widely in north west Spain, west of the Pyrenees, and in the northern half of Portugal on mountain slopes, roadside verges and banks, and in light deciduous woodland. It can be found from just about sea level up to around 6000ft, though it should be emphasised that this part of Spain and Portugal is quite green and does not have high summer temperatures. Because of this range of altitude there is a long flowering season, from February near the coast to May in the high mountains. There are places where it grows in crevices of rocky outcrops right through villages. This is probably the variety from which most of the *triandrus* hybrids have been bred.

Var. *concolor*

Var. *concolor* has had a chequered botanical history, having at times been classified as a subspecies and as a species in its own right (*N. concolor*). Spanish and Portuguese botanists are now going back to the latter idea but are applying the name *N. lusitanicus*. I find the references confusing, and I do not think that this proposal has yet gained international acceptance. The outstanding feature of this plant is the golden yellow colour of the flowers, both petals (usually twisted) and corona. In the extensive populations I have seen I have not come across any paler ones. Though sometimes the coronas are narrower, they are usually chunky in appearance, often wider than they are high. The anthers are rarely exerted, and with narrow bright green leaves I am surprised that botanists should put its affinities with var. *triandrus* rather than with *N. t. pallidulus*. I think it is nearer to the latter, and I would be happy to see it treated as a subspecies in its own right. It grows in a comparatively restricted area of central Portugal, mostly in the valleys of the rivers Douro and Zezere. Its habitats are mainly steep wooded hillsides and rocky ledges, but sometimes it can be found in more open situations. Its locations overlap those of var. *triandrus*, but I do not know of any natural hybrids between them

Var. *pulchellus*

The reverse bicolour var. *pulchellus* has yellow petals and a white or paler yellow corona. It arose in cultivation and I have found no record of it ever having been seen in the wild, though I have spent much time looking. Over 200 years ago it seems that it was widely

grown in the north of England and it had the reputation of being a strong and vigorous plant, but now it is hardly known at all. If it does exist in the wild I would expect it to be among subsp. *pallidulus* rather than var. *triandrus*.

Var. *loiseleurii*

This grows on two of the Iles de Glenans, a small group of low lying islands a few miles off the Brittany coast of France and hundreds of miles from the nearest populations of *N. triandrus* in Spain. Until recently the only way of reaching these islands was by fishing boat or yacht, Visitors were discouraged and a serious conservation programme has been undertaken, resulting in a dramatic increase in numbers. The plant is said to be strong, but I have not seen plants from this source so cannot compare them with var. *triandrus* from Spain. I doubt whether they are significantly different.

Subspecies *pallidulus*

Subspecies *pallidulus* is the most extensive of the *triandrus* tribe. Compared with var. *triandrus* it is a smaller plant with narrower and usually erect green leaves, more slender stems and smaller flowers. Typically it has only one or two flowers on a stem, but exceptionally up to four or even five. Shapes of the corona vary as with var. *triandrus* but not quite as much. Colour is usually very pale yellow or cream (in England the colour of cream varies a lot!), occasionally milky white. Rarely one finds darker yellow populations, but never quite the golden yellow of var. *concolor*. Most colonies are fairly uniform in colour, but sometimes there is quite a spread of colour. Even then the yellowest ones do not look quite the same as var. *concolor*.

This subspecies is found in Spain from a northern limit just south of the Pyrenees down to the Sierra Nevada in the south and from the provinces of Teruel and Zamora in the east to the Portuguese border in the west. It also grows widely in central Portugal. The most impressive blooms I have seen were in the Sierra Morena in the area between Puertollano and La Carolina. Habitats tend to vary with altitude. Higher up, where it is cooler, they will be happy in exposed sites with little or no shelter. Lower down they prefer woodland or the edges of woodland where they get plenty of light and air in winter and spring but protection from the heat of summer. Soil conditions are usually on the acid side of neutral. There is often exceptionally good flowering where a hillside has been burnt a year or two previously.

Aberrant Forms

With such huge numbers of flowers it is not surprising that aberrant forms occur from time to time. Normally coronas are either parallel sided or slightly incurved at the mouth. Very rarely one sees the corona shaped like a church bell, curved outwards at the mouth. I have seen double or semi-double flowers at the Collado de los Jardines near Santa Elena and at Collado de Los Rehoyos above Solano del Pino. These were interesting but to my mind no improvement on the delicate beauty of the regular form. I have yet to discover whether they will breed true from seed.