

From the Ground Up: Daffodils aplenty at Nantucket festival

Sunday

Posted Apr 30, 2017 at 2:01 AM

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“We have short time to stay, as you, We have as short a spring...” —
from Robert Herrick’s *To Daffodils*.

The poet T. S. Eliot deemed April the “cruellest month.” He might have felt differently had he gone to Nantucket, where the contagious cheer of the daffodil runs rampant. Summer’s harbinger, the annual Daffodil Festival that kicked off two days ago and continues through the end of today is like a crash course in hope and positivity. While vacationing with friends in Nantucket a week before the much touted Daffodil Days festivities, it was impossible not to be enchanted by so many daffodils spread over hill and vale, decorating shops and residences around the town. It stirred my memories of springtime in England — where daffodils reign, from London’s parks to the countryside of North Yorkshire, where monks are believed to have planted them. Narcissus, the genus to which all daffodils belong, are a beautiful complement to every landscape — be it woodland, field or along a garden wall or in planters as so many are in Nantucket town.

My friend Susan Ste. Marie agreed: “Daffodils seemed to be sprouting up everywhere we looked...every field, every garden, even the smallest patch of land was frosted with the sunny yellow blooms, like a great big ‘hello’ from Mother Nature after the long winter, an awakening of sorts. We thoroughly enjoyed the sight. It felt like a surprise gift from

those who planted them. Simply a joy!” The ubiquitous yellow flower does indeed herald a great awakening among Nantucketers while signaling the beginning of the visitor season. The Festival includes a parade, flower show, and numerous activities where residents and visitors alike can whoop it up. The first one, back in 1974 was comparatively simple, including an antique car parade in which islanders showed off their classic cars, followed by a community tailgate picnic in 'Sconset. Decades later, the Daffodil Festival on Nantucket includes art shows, tours, parades (including the antique car parade, a dog parade and tailgate picnic), a hat pageant, a mile-long picnic, and the main event: the annual and tightly judged daffodil flower show. There are exhibitions, contests, lectures, and the side show of festival goers who dress up for the occasion and participate enthusiastically. The Nantucket Island Chamber of Commerce organizes a Daffy Hat Contest, a Children's Parade featuring decorated bikes, strollers, wagons, and other self-propelled vehicles, the Antique Car Parade, a window decorating contest, the famous Sconset Tailgate Picnic, and a Family Picnic at Children's Beach. The Pine Woods Morris Dancers often perform throughout the day at various locations.

The 43rd Annual Nantucket Community Daffodil Flower Show, sponsored by the Nantucket Garden Club and approved by The American Daffodil Society, will continue today from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at Bartlett's Ocean View Farm, a seventh-generation family farm located at 33 Bartlett Farm Road. Admission to the flower show is free, but donations will be accepted toward the Garden Club's Daffodil Planting Fund.

While meandering around the island without much of anything to encumber us, we spontaneously hired a tour guide named Ara Charder who filled us in on the story behind the daffodils, (and many other stories!). She told us about how the original plan was to plant tulips but since they tend to diminish over time, the daffodil was chosen. The initial project began with installation of 1 million bulbs, she told us, pulling up to Sankaty Head Light in Siconset for a closer look at the blooming daffs.

“Imagine a million bulbs! That must have taken days to plant,” said Amy Gracia, as astonished as any of us. As we learned from Ara, the initial planting was completed with help from the Public Works department use utilized backhoes to get the job done.

While there is a certain marketing aspect to the daffodils planted here, the root of the island’s daffodil planting lies in its community feeling. Every year, on a day in late November, selected groups — landscape experts, scouts, among others take to the roadsides and open areas of Nantucket and plant the daffodils in big drifts, which is the best way to view them. On a productive day as many as 5,000 bulbs go in the ground in a three hour span. Sconset, once a fishing village and now a summer colony, is adorned in roses in the summer remained virtually unpeopled, but the daffs were busting out nonetheless. They add that certain vital shot of sunshine to the desolate areas.

These are the perfect flowers, growing in any type of soil and thriving in dappled shade or full sun. Daffodils come in a wide variety of shapes and forms, from the tiny cyclamineus hybrids and their swept-back petals to the tall trumpet styles and frillier double forms. Most are yellow, but there are cultivars in shades of white, yellow, pink and orange, some with touches of red and green.

Daffodils were immortalized by William Wordsworth in his 1804 poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” which extols their features and their powerful aftereffect. It is easy to understand how moved he was when you see so many in one sweeping glance.

While we did wander, I wondered why the early flowers tend to be yellow. I’m sure there are biological reasons, like reproductive purposes or that the lighter color petals allow light to penetrate more easily to the earth to allow other plants to muscle forth from the soil. But, might it also be nature’s announcement that out of bleakness, there is reason to be optimistic? The season of light has returned and these flowers are like tiny blazing stars.

My colleague Sheryl Piazza noted: “The daffodils were waving in the wind as we wound our way through the narrow streets.” With such alliteration in her speech, it’s no surprise that she teaches English. In fact, her recollection is quite accurate for on the sidelines in town and out in the remoter regions, daytime and night, these yellow trumpets shared in our experience as refreshing reminders. We were on holiday. Our correcting, our concerns were temporarily on hold. It gave us a chance to catch our breath and enjoy our surroundings and bank some future memories.