

Garden Guru: Narcissus: Official trumpets of spring bring incredible joy

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Daffodils are trumpeting spring in the south, bringing the garden unparalleled beauty coupled with deer resistance. (Photo by Norman Winter/For Savannah Morning News)



Grand Soleil d'Or is a striking tazetta narcissus dating back to 1770. (Photo by Norman Winter/For Savannah Morning News)



Erlicheer, a double-flowered tazetta narcissus, brings out the cameras as quickly as large selections. (Photo by Norman Winter/For Savannah Morning News)



Carlton, a daffodil selection from 1927, is a stalwart performer in the south. (Photo by Norman Winter/For Savannah Morning News)



Norman Winter

The first hint of spring is trumpeting so to speak in the south with the arrival of the narcissus or daffodil. I hate writing about flowers that are opposite their planting season, but on the other hand there are certainly some lessons that can be learned. The biggest lesson is which ones will naturalize in your area. You have to admit that looking at a catalogue of daffodil blooms will make you want each and every one.

Over the years I have been blessed to go to farms in Louisiana with Bill Welch of Texas A&M while he was researching for his book "The Southern Heirloom Garden." Seeing acres of naturalized narcissus Campernelli will be an everlasting memory. While most of us don't have acres of land in which to cultivate, we would like to see our daffodils become happy and to naturalize.

In the hot and humid conditions of Georgia, many of those famous large selections may look great the first year but offer few if any blooms the second. In no way am I disparaging these varieties. On the other hand, recently I was assisting a commercial horticulturist with a large project where 20,000 bulbs would be planted in a high-profile location. We needed the bulbs to look good the first year and the subsequent ones, too. I knew what I was taught at Texas A&M but I needed a little reaffirmation.

I turned to the book "Daffodils in Florida" by Linda M. and Sara L. Van Beck. To me this is the definitive guide allowing our region of the country to not only create, but reside in daffodil heaven. We decided to go with Carlton for the large 20,000 daffodil display. This 1927 selection was one of the varieties engrained in my memory as being superior. But what does the book say about Carlton. It says this flower should be the backbone of any daffodil bed. True enough it has been a remarkable selection.

Perhaps in your specific area Carlton won't be a stalwart performer, but I assure you there is a narcissus that will bring cheer to your landscape. Speaking of cheer, here at the Coastal Georgia Botanical Gardens, Ice Follies has proven to be a winner as has a small 1934 double tazetta by the name of Erlicheer. It brings out the cameras just as quickly as a large trumpet. The Grand Soleil d'Or is another tazetta dating back to 1770 showing out now in our Mediterranean Garden.

Daffodils prefer sunny locations, although open shade will not prove to be a big detriment. For best naturalization, plant your bulbs in a well-drained area. Raised beds rich in organic matter are perfect for combining pansies and daffodils. Plant the bulbs about twice as deep as they are tall, 5 to 6 inches for large bulbs and 3 to 5 inches deep for smaller ones. Spacing 6 to 8 inches apart will allow for increasing in size before crowding.

One of the biggest mistakes gardeners make in growing daffodils is cutting the foliage after the flowers have diminished. The leaves are vital to next year's bloom. Leave them growing as long as possible or at least eight weeks. I'm proud to say our high visibility location lets the daffodils grow until the foliage disappears on its own. The result has been an amazing stand getting not only naturalized but increasing in size.

I would be remiss if I didn't urge you to grow the daffodil in mixed containers as well. Containers with pansies, violas, dianthus will become like a spring crescendo of floral beauty. Visit a public garden like the Coastal Georgia Botanical Gardens this spring and seek out the best narcissus for your area. You'll enjoy the beauty for years to come.

Norman Winter is the director of the Coastal Georgia Botanical Gardens at the Historic Bamboo Farm, University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. Follow him on twitter @CGBGgardenguru.

Low County Home and Garden Show

Don't you dare miss the 17th Low Country Home and Garden Show today and tomorrow at the International Trade & Convention Center. The Coastal Georgia Botanical Gardens Stage will have non-stop educational programs and a special fairy garden demonstration area. The show is 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Jan. 28 and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Jan. 29.

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