

GEORGE W. HEATH OF GLOUCESTER, VA.

By FRANKLIN D. SENEY, *Newport News, Va.*

On May 15, 1965 *albus plenus odoratus* opened its last flower on Back Creek, an estuary of the North River in Gloucester County, Va., and there came to a close the fortieth season of daffodil growing for one of the most enthusiastic growers of this flower in the country, George W. Heath. No one knows how many people have visited his display gardens and exhibits, or how many people have received pleasure from the cut varieties which he has shipped all over the country, but everyone knows that he has been for an extended period of time a potent force in the encouragement of the growth of daffodils.

George Heath came by his liking for daffodils naturally, since his father, attracted by the ease with which naturalized varieties grew there, had settled in the Gloucester area early in the century and had imported improved varieties from abroad to produce better cut flowers for the trade. The old variety Trumpet Major grows wild in the area and will take root if sown on top of the ground like grass seed. This was the variety which many years back was commonly sent to the city markets from the Gloucester area.

When the government imposed a quarantine on bulbs in 1926, the firm of M. Van Waveren & Sons investigated the possibility of growing daffodils on land belonging to Charles Heath, George's father. They found that the soil did grow exceptional daffodils, and they agreed to lease all 300 acres of Mr. Heath's land for the growing of their finest bulbs under quarantine and under scientifically controlled conditions to guard against nematodes. Several hundred acres were also leased from other individual owners. Dutch foremen were brought in to superintend the local workers, but they were unable to get along with the colored help, and it was then that George Heath came home from China, where he was working for the British-American Tobacco Company, to take over the enterprise. Thus was born an interest in daffodils which has lasted for four decades.

George was able to offer the proper incentives, and the bulb growing venture prospered under his direction. Just before World War II, the quarantine was lifted, and bulbs grown in Holland were once more available. Van Waveren withdrew, and the situation for flower growers in Gloucester County changed considerably in the face of renewed competition from abroad. However, the local people decided to carry on, and they have been successful to this day since their flowers are marketed during a springtime period when competition from other areas is lightest.

During the period with Van Waveren, George Heath held an annual

display of blooms which seedmen from all over the country came to view, in order to see what new and old things were available. One of the first amateur growers to see his flowers was Carey E. Quinn. This viewing of cut flowers and blooming plants still continues today, although the people who come to see the displays now are mostly amateur growers rather than professionals.

After the Dutch left, George formed an association with other people for the raising of cut flowers for market and began bringing in bulbs from Ireland and England, none of which were being retailed in this country at the time. It was his idea to raise the bulbs here for two years or more to acclimatize them and then make them available to amateur growers. He planted two or three acres of expensive bulbs before going away on a World War II Navy assignment. Upon his return he found the bulbs had so multiplied that he could start supplying fanciers with the newer and rarer bulbs.

Broughshane was one of the bulbs which attracted him, and he bought a bulb of it at \$100 when it was first introduced, offering bulbs after they had multiplied and settled down at \$10 each. At one time he raised 1,400 named varieties, and he was able to name at sight most of them. As a matter of fact, he did not depend upon sight alone, and his wife says that she has seen him inhale a daffodil's scent deeply to help in identifying its variety.

George Heath has been a close associate of many of the founders of the American Daffodil Society and was one of its earlier directors. He has also written articles for the American Horticultural Society, and he has shown a special interest in the growth and propagation of miniatures.

No mention of George Heath should overlook his attractive wife, Katharine, who handles the business details of their enterprise. About five years ago the two Heaths started what has now become a really magnificent planting of bulbs at their place in Gloucester, the Daffodil Mart. A few miles out of the town of Gloucester you come to a pleasant wayside, and then you turn down a country road until you reach their entrance. There on the right is a large clump of daffodils, and as you drive down their lane you see daffodils naturalized on either side. Soon you arrive at a grove of pine trees which have very high bare trunks and with foliage principally at the top. This type of planting appears to be a bit shady for daffodils, but the slanting rays of the sun must penetrate at different times of the day. This arrangement appears to be ideal because red cups retain their freshness longer, and all colors seem to be intensified.

Maintenance of this planting is no small thing, because, as each

variety of bulb is dug, the old soil is removed and carried away. Fresh soil is then brought in to fill the holes for the next planting.

Under the pine trees the Heaths each spring make a sawdust trail, spangled with the gold and other colors of daffodils. The sawdust is on the path where you walk, and as you follow it along, you see a fine collection of daffodils arranged in alphabetical order. There is also an open shed with cut flowers and pictures illustrating the various RHS divisions. Behind this building there is a planting of the very newest which the Heaths think should be called to the attention of the daffodil fanciers.

These are not all the horticultural treasures of this magic forest. Interspersed among the daffodils are other flowers which bloom along with them: single early tulips, hyacinths, *Tulipa fosteriana*, *Tulipa greigii*, scillas, chionodoxas, galanthus, alliums and anemones. The garden is a practical treatise on other bulbs which grow at the same time as the daffodils. The Heaths also grow daffodils in open rows in the fields. Both plantings are used for cutting their displays for flower shows which they have sent to many parts of the country. Their exhibits at the Garden Club of Gloucester and the Tidewater Virginia Flower Shows are always outstanding. They pick their flowers at prime and hold them over when necessary in wet storage in the icebox until showtime.

Fall is also a good time at the Heaths'. Gone then is the hurry of the blooming season, and time begins to stretch a little more as winter approaches. A visit to their daffodil barn during bulb planting time is a matter of pleasure and promise, for here are the stored up intricacies of future blooms from England, Ireland and the two coasts of the U.S.A., waiting for the proper culture to blossom forth into next year's prize flowers. This is the time when you can talk or think at leisure about the varieties which you will be getting a year or two later and the ones which have now come within your reach. The mellow grey timbers of the Heath's ancient barn, which was once owned by George Washington, afford a pleasant place for such contemplation.

George Heath has not only spread his enthusiasm for daffodils in many directions, but he has also published his own system of classifying daffodils. This is an extension or further breakdown of the present RHS listing which helps identify the color of varieties in addition to the shape and character of the flower. He has also published a list of relative blooming dates for daffodils and at various times his own ratings of the merits of the daffodils then in cultivation.

Mention must also be made of his other interest, the collection of shells. George Heath has acquired an authoritative knowledge of the culture and form of daffodils through the years, but he has also gone

“shelling” during the winters when all his daffodils were planted. In the colder weather it is his custom to journey southward to hunt for shells. He has a very fine collection of matched shells at his home in Gloucester displayed in cabinets and table tops under glass. He is as well versed in this field as he is with narcissi.

He is no less generous with his knowledge concerning shells than he is with daffodils. During our recent visit to the Heaths, he “prescribed” for a suspected touch of nematodes in my daffodil plantings—the prescription was a heavy dose of kerosene applied to the soil—and he offered our two boys some very choice shells for their own collections. They, like myself, look upon George Heath as someone special, a real enthusiast whose interests have spread widely and who has helped to make known to us all the splendor of daffodils in the spring.