

Daffodils of all varieties a sure sign of sunny days ahead

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Lynn Ischay, The Plain Dealer These are the

days of the daffodil -- whether a pampered show competitor, a weather-beaten clump that pokes up underneath a neighborhood oak, or thousands of blooms combining into a vista of sunny yellow. Lake View Cemetery's Daffodil Sunday is this Sunday, followed by the Cleveland Botanical Garden's Daffodil Show on Saturday, April 23 and Sunday, April 24.

Daniel Bellinger was raised on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where winters seem to hang on forever. When spring finally arrived, "it was always like a release from bondage," he recalled.

He didn't see a daffodil until he went to college. Now, the retired engineer breeds daffodils, or narcissus, at his home near Akron.

Why daffodils? "Why would you love any flower?" said Bellinger, 63, who helped organize the upcoming [Cleveland Botanical Garden's Daffodil Show](#). "It's tangible beauty that is in the world with us."

Amen to that. Daffodils are my favorite flower. They are both beautiful and brave, often poking their heads through crusts of snow to bring a spot of color into a dreary early-spring day.

Years ago, when I was dabbling in nature photography, I spent a happy morning taking shots of the blooms in Rockefeller Park. Alas, my poor talent wasn't equal to capturing the glory of standing in the midst of thousands of blooms. You just had to be there.

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I could drag out my camera to try again at Lake View Cemetery's Daffodil Sunday, which is this Sunday. Recently, I had lunch with Bellinger, a slender man with a gentle demeanor, because I wanted to learn more about the upcoming Cleveland Botanical Garden's Daffodil Show, being held in conjunction with the Western Reserve Daffodil Society. Bellinger, who breeds narcissus, is helping to organize the show, Saturday, April 23, and Sunday, April 24.

I wondered how exciting a show of all daffodils could be. Sure, they're nice, but they're all yellow with big trumpets, right?

Bellinger handed me several booklets and catalogs to educate me. I was dumbfounded. I discovered page upon page of daffodils that look so different, I wouldn't have recognized them as narcissus.

There were varieties with pale-cream, pale-yellow, deep-orange, pink and even green-tinged petals and cups. They can have double petals or ruffled cups.

My favorite had petals that were swept back; the flower looked as if it were riding a motorcycle.



Tom Stettner Jr. Daffodil breeders are offering

new strains of the familiar flower, such as this 'Southern Hospitality' cultivar. Daffodil devotees can get their fill of their favorite blooms at flower shows and outdoor displays this month.

Bellinger explained that for decades, breeders in New Zealand, Tasmania and other spots around the globe have created narcissus that go beyond the expected.

It takes between five and eight years to grow a hybridized flower from a seed, Bellinger said, and even longer to find out whether it's a strain worth keeping. Only one in 10 new strains is good enough to be named.

"You want something that is better in some way, shape or form than anything out there," he said.

He's named 19 of his own breeds, including 'Tilden,' noted for its orange petals and red corona, and 'Anne Bronte,' which charms with tiny red cups.

Bellinger showed me a photograph of his prize-winning 'Molly Malone Cook.' Its gorgeously delicate, frilly, yellow-orange cups contrast with snow-white petals. It was judged best in the state in competition last year, he said.

He may enter an example from his collection, 'Lady Diana,' which has a very large bloom and smooth petals.

"It looks as if it's been ironed," he said.

By then, I was salivating at the thought of having these spectacular beauties in my yard. I have only a few anemic clumps of daffodils and tulips that struggle up from the clay soil every year, and I gave up trying to plant more because the soil is like cement.

Bellinger encouraged me to grow daffodils in containers. Make sure the pot is at least 2 feet deep, and plant the bulbs 3 inches under the soil surface.

He also suggested attending the botanical garden show and asking the growers for their extra bulbs from interesting cultivars. Growers always have extra bulbs because they naturally multiply and must be thinned.

Bellinger often gives his extras to schools to sell at fundraisers.

Last year, he gave 500 bulbs to the Brooklyn Centre Naturalists. Bellinger led me to the group's co-founder Gloria Ferris. The Cleveland neighborhood organization promotes compatibility between the natural environment and the community, located near the [Cleveland Metroparks Zoo](#).

Ferris described how pleased the naturalists were with Bellinger's generosity, and how she exclaimed "Five hundred bulbs!" when the boxes were delivered.

She worried about whether the group could get them all in the ground. About 20 volunteers grabbed shovels and planted the bulbs last fall in a community orchard, in a small park and near businesses on Pearl Road and Denison Avenue, Ferris said.

Now, the "tangible beauty" that Bellinger spoke of is all over one city neighborhood.

"We never say no to anything that makes our area more beautiful," Ferris said. "Every time I see [the flowers], my heart goes leaping for joy."

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