



Joe Hamm's Washington County garden is a daffodil delight



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Joe Hamm began growing daffodils as a teen. He also grew hosta, daylilies and many types of vegetables, but these cheerful spring bloomers were his favorite for one reason: Deer and other varmints won't touch them, ever.

So when he got tired of spraying and fencing to keep four-legged pests away, he turned to daffodils.

"They are poisonous," he says.

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The retired interior designer is a North Side native who worked and lived in Indiana from 1960 to 2009. Since 2010, he has lived on approximately 6 acres in Buffalo, Washington County. His garden, which boasts more than 2,000 cultivated varieties and 30,000 blooms, is designated as an American Daffodil Society

Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, is the only other ADS garden in the state. These gardens offer the public a chance to see and learn about the many different registered types of daffodils. Mr. Hamm's garden is open each day from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. through the end of April at no charge. There will also be an ADS juried daffodil show in Mr. Hamm's historic barn next weekend. This is the fourth year at this location. Show hours are 2:30-7:30 p.m. April 23 and 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. April 24. No bulbs will be sold. However, cut daffodils are usually available for a donation.

Mr. Hamm first got into daffodils in a big way when he saw some elderly women polishing daffodil bulbs at a daylily sale in 1989.

"I had raised daffodils since I was about 13, but I never cared about names.... Then I found out they all had names. At that time, there was about 29,000 (named varieties)," he said in a phone interview.

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"At first I was overwhelmed by the numbers and knew I couldn't collect all those. I concentrated on the year of my birth, 1938, thinking I could get all of those. But some have disappeared and are nonexistent. Then I said I'd collect everything before 1900."

Each daffodil cultivar is officially registered. The date the daffodil was registered determines its class. His collection now is largely historic plants, which are those in cultivation before 1939, and classic daffs, which encompasses plants from the 1940s to 1969. He also collects examples of the work of some daffodil hybridizers.

"I have (plants from) about 300 hybridizers, both American and foreign," he says.

Some of these hybrids are fairly recent. He also collects miniature daffodils, and has a bed full of those.

Mr. Hamm refers to his garden as a hortus, which is a botanical garden that serves as kind of a plant archive. His sister, Georgine Materniak, resides in Squirrel Hill and shares her brother's enthusiasm for daffodils. She and her friend, Carol Stough of Washington, Pa., help Mr. Hamm maintain the beds, and plant and harvest the bulbs.

"I am not a business," Mr. Hamm states firmly.

He does sell his bulbs at the Washington Farmer's Market and sends a list of plants he's dividing to collectors.

"The surplus I sell to keep the study and preservation going. ... I lost my legs in 2010, so I rely on others for the planting and digging. I just didn't want to let it go."

Mr. Hamm says that most double every year and need to be divided.

"It depends on how crowded the beds get. If we don't dig them, they don't multiply right. You need to dig and split daffodils about every five years. Otherwise you'll get lots of foliage and not many blooms."

Beyond division, the plants are hardy and don't require too much fussing.

Over the years, he has supplied plants for President Benjamin Harrison's home in Indianapolis and for a trolley stop renovation in Monongahela.

"Offhand I can think of two (historic) houses we did here in Washington, Pa. And then we did the cemetery in Buffalo Village. Those we tried to get based on the earliest plants, one from from the Revolutionary era, to about 1834," he says.

Does he have a particular favorite in his collection?

"I really don't. It's like one friend of ours used to say: 'It's the one I have in my hand at the time.'"

Hamm's farm is located at 99 Maple Road, Buffalo Village, Washington, PA 15301.

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