

Little wonders: Alan Titchmarsh on growing dwarf narcissi

DWARF narcissi stay defiantly cheerful whatever the weather. And now's the time to plant them.

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I've stopped planting what a friend of mine calls "cooking daffs". It is such a wonderful expression and I know exactly what she means: those beefy, bulk varieties like 'King Alfred' that bow down in heavy rain and snow to let on board any passing slug or snail who can then chew the flowers to pieces

I now confine myself to the dwarf varieties of narcissus (the posh botanical name for the daffodil). Apart from being more in keeping with the size of our gardens today, these plants have none of the gracelessness you may expect of anything labelled "dwarf".

Instead, they are perfectly proportioned little flowers of incomparable beauty that stay upright whatever the weather and last for weeks on end in late winter and early spring.

The sooner you plant the better, for if you've ever dug up a daffodil by mistake in August you'll notice that it has already started rooting.

Most garden centres stock a range but specialist nurseries are the best place to buy since they offer the widest selection. Broadleigh Gardens near Taunton is one of them (broadleighbulbs.co.uk) and it will supply literally dozens of varieties by mail order.

Early planting is recommended, but I have committed daffodil bulbs to the earth almost as late as Christmas and had a good show.



Plant the bulbs to three times their own depth, in clumps of five or 10 (spacing two to three inches apart), so that each “bunch” can be admired. Among shrubs and in gaps towards the front of borders they will look brilliant at any time from February to April.

And don't be too keen when it comes to tidying up the faded foliage. Allow it to die down quite naturally for six weeks after flowering so that it can feed the bulbs and ensure more flowers next year.

The commonest varieties are often reliable and reasonably priced. You will never be let down by ‘Tête-à-tête’, ‘Jenny’, ‘Little Witch’ and ‘Jetfire’, and you can buy a few more each year.

Daffodil planting is, for me, the greatest excitement of autumn!

Don't miss Alan's gardening column today and Tip Of The Day every weekday in the Daily Express. For more details on his range of gardening products, visit alantitchmarsh.com.