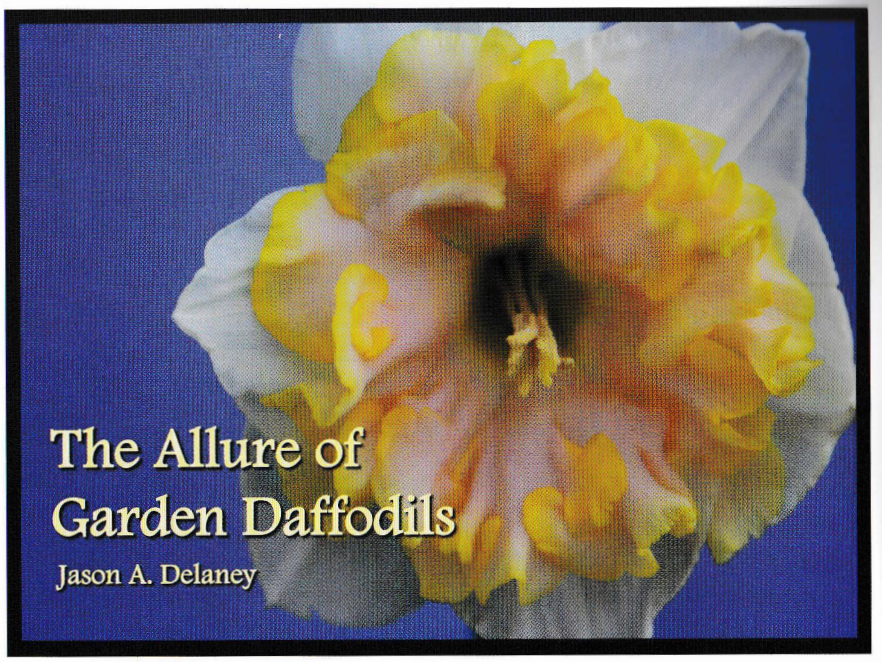


The Allure of Garden Daffodils

Jason A. Delaney

What is your first recollection of discovering daffodils; or, perhaps, of daffodils discovering you? Maybe in your youth, a profound moment forever secured your interest. Maybe a pastoral landscape where daffodils were left to naturalize caught your eye and stirred your curiosity? Maybe it was an old, abandoned house and garden, or a field where a house once stood, whose relict daffodils and other, now wild flowers lured you by moonlight, with shovel in tow, providing an exhilarating feat of horticultural liberation and a start to your burgeoning collection. Botanical gardens and arboreta oft celebrate spring's arrival with floral shows and even ceremonious festivals honoring the daffodil; maybe you visited at just the right time? For many, it was through a gardening relative or friend, or from one of those interesting daffodil society members you met at a show, that graciously provided your very first bulbs, thus the beginning of a long and colorful future.

The first daffodils to capture our interest, by our own definition, were likely beautiful, pretty, and colorful; lovely and charming, even. For those who delved further into their new-found interest, the discovery of fragrances sweet to spicy warranted copious bouquets for the house and to share with others. Doubtful, I'm sure, did your beginner's lexicon for

describing these flowers include asymmetry, nicks, ribs, mitten thumbs, pointy, starry, long necks, and garden variety; and any notion of disdain for their exuberant and irregular ruffling which occasionally caught a petal or two, would have been downright silly. In fact, this natural look may have been the very facet you most enjoyed about your first daffodils. You appreciated each of your daffodils, equally. You knew no differently.

My first memory of daffodils hovers from around age four. Daffodils in the gardens of my elder relatives and from the naturalized colonies adorning the surrounding country fields where farmsteads once stood formed the basis of my exposure. Trumpets that were referred to as "King Alfreds" and "Easter flowers", doubles 'Butter and Eggs' and 'Van Sion', and the sweetly scented, white pheasant's eyes, *Narcissus poeticus*, were the daffodils growing at home, formerly liberated from abandoned farmsteads by my mother and transplanted into our garden. (My mother claims my daffodil obsession stems from her planting our property line with these bulbs when I was seven months in utero. I believe her!) My grandparents and great aunt and great uncle, whose daffodil collections were limitless playgrounds for my fascination, grew fancier mail-order types, some with cups of orange, some with pink, and some even had multiple florets on a stem; one in particular, 'Geranium', confused me, as geraniums were also the red-flowering plants we planted each summer after the daffodils disappeared.

In 1981, a copy of the Breck's fall bulb catalog arrived in the mail, and quickly piqued my interest. I viewed garden catalogs in the sort the way most normal children my age viewed comic books; this catalog might as well have been a rare collector's copy. Thumbing through, it revealed pages of daffodils unlike any grown by my relatives. There were flowers of solid green, and cups of brilliant red and bright pink. These colors were not among those already growing in his garden, so my dear grandfather ordered a collection so that we could see for ourselves. The following spring, my fifth on earth, the daffodils emerged bigger than life and full of colorful blossoms, but nary a daffodil of green, red, or pink was among them. They were just ordinary yellow, orange, and white daffodils. (It was something to do with color-enhanced photographs, I would later learn.)

The real game changer came in 1984. By this point I was already strangely obsessed with digging and relocating daffodils as they emerged,

which provided much insight into their season of bloom, based on their foliar development; and, I had mastered the visual identification of trumpet, small- and large-cupped daffodils from their early bud stage. Doubles, like 'Van Sion', were always dead-ringer, as were the jonquils and tazettas. I knew everything about daffodils, or so I thought, and I had met every different type that grew. And then the new Breck's fall bulb catalogs arrived.

This time, it was their cover model daffodils whose outrageous and otherworldly forms, not fake colors, swept me aloft. No amount of photographic trickery could create flowers like these—they were undoubtedly real types I could never have imagined possible, and they were for sale! Described by the catalogs as butterfly and orchid types, they were entirely novel, and I was smitten. My grandfather again ordered

some, and again, the bulbs emerged the following spring to reveal nothing more than a blend of ruffled, large-cupped daffodils. The whole ordeal was more empowering than dissuading: I wanted those flowers for my garden, and I was not going to stop until I found them. They existed, and I would one day grow them!

General bulb catalogs have always offered an alluring assortment of flowers suited for our gardens. Popular, dependable, easy, affordable, and marketable varieties have driven their annual offerings. Whereas the titans of popular tulip and hyacinth varieties varied greatly from the mid-1800s through the early 1910s, popular daffodil varieties remained, for the most, static. These were largely the first few generations beyond the species; the forms and colors we know today were still many years away from developement. These daffodils were easily produced and became established, dependable growers and repeat sellers. Their intended purpose was more utilitarian than ornamental; not for the border, but more for naturalizing.

As early colored and ultimately color photographs in catalogs began appearing more commonly, a new market face for the daffodil was born. By the early 1920s, more and more varieties were being offered; yet, even the newest offerings were still simple in their appearance and form; ruffles, overlapped petals, and the flat, large cups in the sense we know them today, were still rare in the commercial sector, and reverse bicolors and pinks were only beginning to emerge. By the 1930s and 1940s, daffodil offerings provided the full range of the available color spectrum, and overlapped petals and ruffled coronas were increasingly common. In many catalogs, daffodils for the very first time surpassed tulips and hyacinths as the newest, greatest spring flowering bulb for the garden. Rare pink-cupped and all-white trumpet daffodils of merit easily fetched $200 per bulb in the specialty arena, and these prices quickly found their way into the offerings of general mail-order suppliers, where appreciation and demand for these new garden daffodils was at an all-time historical high.

One such popular new daffodil was 'John Evelyn'. Introduced initially into the specialty trade by William Copeland in 1920, it provided at once both an aesthetically and genetically unique flower among the many: big, overlapped petals; a flat, ruffled, and richly colored corona; and a constitution worthy of commercial appeal. Eventually grown for many

years as a commercial garden bulb, perhaps its greatest contribution was its breeding potential, which was quickly realized and tapped by the ever-innovative Dutch. In only one generation, they created from 'John Evelyn' an entirely new look of garden daffodils that, for much of the remainder of the twentieth century, would dominate the global market.

"Weatherproof Daffodils" became the commercial moniker for the original descendents of 'John Evelyn'. Their large, bold, colorful, ruffled, flat-cupped and thick-substance flowers and hardy, vigorous growth quickly transformed the staid listings in nearly every mail-order catalog in America. By the 1960s and 1970s, "Weatherproof Daffodils" became so ubiquitous and widely marketed in the gardening world that they were often considered their own special division of daffodils. Mail-order merchants such as Wayside Gardens commonly filled their catalogs with lip-smacking, full-color photos of these new daffodils: "A collection of new Incomparabilis varieties raised from hybridizing work with the well known variety, 'John Evelyn'. They are extremely vigorous and have no objections to adverse weather conditions. All have very large, flat, frilled crowns of great substance. Very useful for all purposes, from winning shows to naturalizing." A new era of garden daffodils had been established.

Of the eventual 49 first-generation recorded and numerous unrecorded introductions of these "Weatherproof Daffodils" to enter the American market, with most hailing from the Netherlands, the single greatest contribution from 'John Evelyn' was the 1953 Konynenberg and Mark introduction, 'Ice Follies'. Upon its initial American release, Park Seed Company provided 'Ice Follies' the following description: "The large, 2" flat cup is solid lemon primrose, evenly colored and pleated to the throat. The 4 ½" perianths are paper white, flat and round. Flowers are held erect and perpendicular on strong, 16" stems. Watching these perfect beauties nodding in the garden, one can almost hear the beautiful Skaters' Waltz." By the early 1990s, 'Ice Follies' had firmly secured its position as one of the most widely grown daffodils in the world, rivaling old 'King Alfred' in popularity and public recognition of what a daffodil looks like. And rightfully so: its bulbs produce a bounty of flowers through steady increase, year after year, coast to coast. Its flowers come early in the season and bloom for a very long period, regardless weather. The bulbs themselves are also superior; resistant to rot and with the ability to grow in less-than-ideal

soil conditions, they provide long-term perennial options in the garden and for naturalizing, and mass production and storage couldn't be easier. The introduction of 'Ice Follies' created the new standard for all daffodils.

At roughly the same time 'John Evelyn' was coming into vogue, the foundation for yet another future group of garden daffodils was quietly emerging. Though taking decades to reach the mainstream commercial sector, these flowers—which, at the time of their introduction and largely until the mid-late 1990s, were considered abominations antithetic to more than a century's worth of hybridizing achievements to refine the daffodil for exhibition purposes—quietly gained momentum. They were the orchid and butterfly daffodils, eventually to be classified as the split-coronas.

First appearing in the early 1920s, in England and in the Netherlands, split-corona breeding and introduction catapulted during the 1950s–1980s with numerous Dutch introductions from hybridizers Dr. W.E. de Mol, Jaap Gerritsen, and J.W.A. Lefeber, whose flowers dominated the commercial sector for nearly forty years. Not one but two distinct forms of these split-corona daffodils emerged, providing characteristics previously unrecognized and requiring a revision to the Royal Horticultural Society's accepted classification system of daffodils. Yet, despite the monumental work of the Dutch breeding programs, the global daffodil cognoscenti would not accept these "blowzy" flowers as meritorious until the late 1980s and early 1990s, when new introductions from hybridizers Colin Crotty, Brian Duncan, Elise Havens, Grant Mitsch, and Ron Scamp began surfacing in daffodil shows around the world. Exhibiting these new, refined varieties, whose petals laid flat and whose ruffling and splitting was symmetrical, was carefully but widely encouraged; today, split-coronas have become an important class in every show. Of all daffodils, perhaps none are better suited for the garden as the flamboyant splits; their exuberant ruffles, bold colors, and steady increase make them ideal contenders for every garden. They are now available in every color and in nearly every shape and size conceivable, thanks to interdivisional breeding with standard and miniature trumpets, large- and small-cups, doubles, and jonquils. 'Itsy Bitsy Splitsy', introduced by Harold Koopowitz, stands to become one of the most popular novelty split-corona daffodils of all time, due to its miniature size, floriferousness, and tremendous potential for the pot culture industry in the Netherlands. Presently, there are nearly 600

registered split-corona daffodils, and their breeding continues. (And, not surprisingly, the world hasn't imploded as a result of their mainstream acceptance!)

Whether for a splash of color in your garden, a primary component of your spring display, maybe a naturalized meadow, or even just as a stock for cut flowers, the daffodil has amply proven itself one of the most invaluable plants in the garden. Long-term, perennial, animal resistant, and providing several weeks to months of display through careful selection, the daffodil gives us much reason to celebrate. In fact, the American Daffodil Society recognizes outstanding garden daffodils with the Wister Award, whose requirements are simple and straightforward:

1. The cultivar must be a good grower. It should have a floriferous habit (many bloom stalks).
2. It should have long-lasting bloom with clean color, be showy at a distance, and be reasonably sunfast.
3. Its foliage should be vigorous, and resistant to disease and frost damage.
4. Its stems should be taller than its foliage, strong and sturdy.
5. Its bulbs should be resistant to basal rot, and not prone to splitting.
6. Emphasis should be on garden performance, although it may be of show-table quality.
7. The cultivar should be readily available.
8. The Wister Award may be given annually.

Shouldn't every daffodil meet these criteria prior to introduction, whether for garden or exhibition purposes? It would stand to reason that we should only promote the very best plants. But do we?

Over the years I have carefully observed with great fascination (and entertainment) the peculiar phenomenon of exhibiting flowers. Universally, it would seem exhibition varieties are given precedence over garden varieties, and one's ultimate success within the organization is measured by his or her ability to achieve the hierarchical rise from the lowly garden variety appreciation to the loftiest of a gold medal win. This is certainly not unique to daffodils; nearly every plant is represented by a society which, in some capacity, promotes and elevates such exhibition.

Most fascinating to me is how the training process and expectations for exhibiting our flowers ultimately, fundamentally alters our perspective from viewing the qualities of a good garden plant, to seeing only the qualifying traits of flower for exhibition. Our once simple appreciation for daffodils growing in our gardens and how beautiful their flowers naturally occurred has been reprogrammed to first recognize the many subjective faults the flowers may manifest, to better enable us to select and grow only those with the greatest floral refinement—how that plant may grow makes absolutely no difference, so long as its flower is perfect, or as near-perfect as one can get. This has become so ingrained that we actually categorize our daffodils as those for the garden, and those for exhibition, as if to say one is good, and one is vastly more superior. Yet even when we have cherry-picked our best, we will still spend countless hours manipulating the individual blossoms, by twisting their necks, breathing moist, warm air onto their petals, cotton swabbing their entirety to free them of soil and other impurities; and in some extreme cases, we will stuff them with cotton balls, tie them up, hang them upside-down, and chill them in the crisper for weeks on end, to create flowers to captivate the judges and garner awards of the highest level. Here we see "Cyclamen Entangled."

This finished flower naturally cannot grow that way, not even under the most ideal conditions, yet we elevate this appearance to be the accepted model for how a truly good daffodil should look. Not grow, but look. (Fitting, really, that Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection, ultimately withering away.)

Admittedly, curiosity to experience this competitive rush has gotten the best of me; I too have exhibited flowers and for the past decade I've played my hand at hybridizing refined exhibition daffodils to one day introduce and exhibit. I appreciate the great effort people endeavor to travel great distances (even across continents) exhibiting their flowers against those of their friends, to capture the most esteemed awards (not to mention, I appreciate the annual digging and planting, irrigation systems, wind breaks, shade cloth, money spent, and everything else required to make it happen). It's fun, it's competitive, and it keeps demand high for new varieties. But at what point in the wee morning hours prior to judging, in a town hundreds of miles from home, after foregoing dinner and losing hours of sleep trying to perfect a corona roll on a trumpet, and swab pollen grains from the inner petaloid segments of a double floret on a could-be champion stem of 'Erlicheer', does one stop and wonder: at what point did I lose sight of the enjoyment of my garden flowers for the convention hall tables filled with myriad test tubes displaying these cut stems of contorted wonders? (Admit it! You've asked yourself this question!)

In our maddening pursuit for perfection, we should from time to time reel ourselves back to the beginning, to a simpler time in our lives; and to the fact that even the most venerated of daffodil hybridizers appreciate, introduce, and promote flowers suited for the garden. It's okay to like them, and to grow them. Really, it is. Grant Mitsch, whose hybridizing efforts we equate with perfection, held a deep reverence for the garden daffodil. Over the years, he introduced numerous garden varieties, including several of 'John Evelyn' breeding. Perhaps one of Mitsch's greatest if not most underappreciated contributions was to the new race of split-coronas, through his early work with Dutch 'Hillbilly', and ultimately with his own 'Phantom', which laid the foundation for the many exhibition-caliber split-coronas we have today, in addition to many colorful and well-formed contemporary garden daffodils still widely available. Elise and Richard Havens have continued this work, creating and introducing their own line

of novelty garden daffodils alongside their world-class exhibition varieties.

John Hunter, whose work focuses exclusively on exhibition flowers, even cut loose a few years ago with the introduction of his 'Bridal Brocade', a daffodil unlike any other, of exhibition caliber and vast genetic potential. Colin Crotty, who for many years focused on garden flowers but is now shifting into exhibition breeding, is combining the flair of his garden flowers with the symmetry and consistency required for the show bench. Brent and Becky Heath, third in the fourth generation of Heaths involved in the bulb business, have created a new race of colorful, fragrant jonquil hybrids manifesting the look of trumpets, large- and small-cups, double, and split-corona types, of tremendous stamina and vast public appeal.

Jason Delaney found 'Copacabana' in John Reed's seedling fields and selected it for registration.

John Reed, whose large-scale breeding may involve hundreds to thousands of seeds per cross, is discovering a terrific range of novelty garden daffodils of exhibition quality within crosses intended solely for exhibition flowers. And Dave Niswonger, who early on infused his

breeding program with 'Ice Follies', is creating in the third and fourth generations daffodils of exhibition-quality perianths with outrageous coronal knobs, hooks, and ruffling akin to "shark's teeth" in the daylily world, in various color combinations, all with the wonderful garden attributes of 'Ice Follies'.

As one might expect, today's Dutch hybridizers continue their eternal pursuit of better garden daffodils. "Stuffed" trumpets and large cups; novel, blast-resistant doubles; and split-corona x double hybrids are starting to appear with greater frequency, with better forms and colors than previously witnessed; and ruffles, flecks, hooks, and knobs are elevated to new extremes; 'Snowtip', a late Karel van der Veek hybrid, is testament to such creativity.

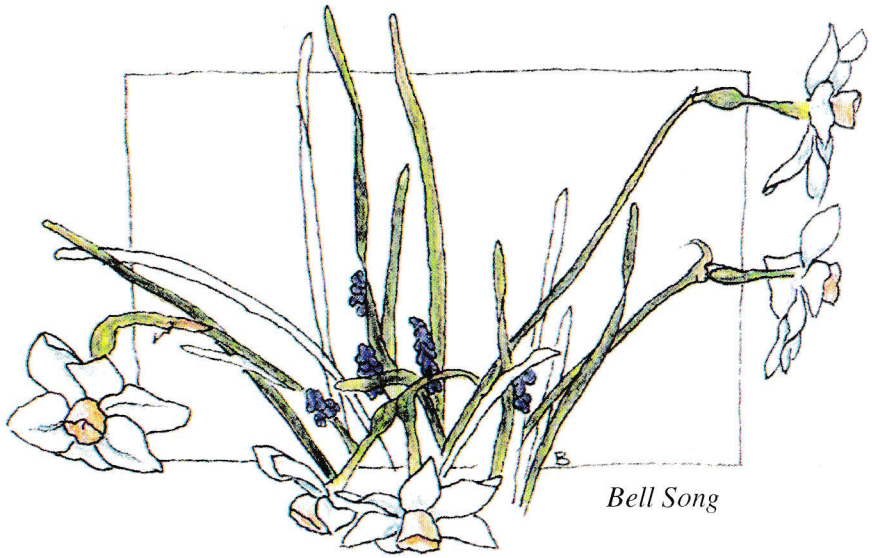
Refined novelty seems to be the new goal of their contemporary floral engineering: new varieties from the late Karel van der Veek will soon reveal perhaps the finest true exhibition Dutch varieties, yet with all of the same garden characteristics which have become so ubiquitously Dutch. Introductions of Rinus van der Salm, Th. van der Hulst, and W.F. Leenen and Sons, to name only a few, are also raising the bar on the bold and the beautiful, while achieving symmetry and consistency of form in their flowers. As ever, the future of Dutch garden daffodil breeding promises to

be freshly innovative and colorful, for many years to come.

And as for this former nine year-old, who was never able to acquire the coveted butterfly and orchid daffodil mixes from Breck's, I decided to pursue hybridizing my own garden daffodils. In the end, the process was a lot more exciting and rewarding, and I have no doubt my grandparents would approve of the outcome—novel forms, colors, and ruffles worthy of my very own catalog cover!

Shortly before your daffodil season returns, think for a moment and remember the very first time you met a daffodil: how old were you, what was the circumstance, and who influenced and guided you toward the appreciation you have today? Pause and reflect on what it was about those first flowers you most enjoyed, and try looking at them again from the same perspective, a perspective that places them in a garden, as garden subjects. Such daffodils are but dear friends from our past, whose visit with us to welcome yet another year is fleeting. Be sure to make time in your busy show season to enjoy that reunion, and to rediscover the allure of your garden daffodils! ❁

[Jason Delaney gave this presentation, lavishly illustrated with color pictures, at the final night's "Under the Tent" Banquet at the home of Jill and Paul Griesse at the 2013 Columbus convention.]



Bell Song