

Welcome spring, and welcome back the daffodils

By Lynette L. Walther | Apr 21, 2017



Photo by: Lynette L. Walther

Reliable and uplifting, daffodils light up spring with cheerful blooms.

It's their year

Harbingers of spring, flowering bulbs like snowdrops, tulips, hyacinths and daffodils have been lighting up landscapes for nearly 300 years here. The cheerful daffodil flowers, members of the narcissus family, are easy to grow, return year after year and multiply in the process. The National Garden Bureau, in partnership with the American Daffodil Society, has named 2017 the Year of the Daffodil, and for good reason. Their arrival on this continent from the Old World is a tale of ingenuity that serves as a testament to our quest for beauty.

Narcissus bulbs were introduced to North America by pioneer women who made the long ocean voyage from Europe to America to build a new future, according to NGB. Given limited space for bringing personal goods, they sewed dormant daffodil bulbs into the hems of their skirts to plant at their new homes to remind them of the gardens they left behind. The remnant ancestors of those bulbs still persist today in older gardens in the eastern half of the U.S., making them a part of our heritage for more than three centuries. Indeed, the presence of daffodils can often mark abandoned homesites with their cheerful blooms.

The official botanical genus name for daffodils is narcissus, which comes from the Greek word "narkissos" and its base word "narke," meaning sleep or numbness, attributed to the sedative effect from the alkaloids in its plants, according to the NGB. The plant family is Amaryllidaceae, meaning all members are poisonous, which is great for gardeners, because that makes them critter-proof. Daffodil is actually just a nickname, not a scientific or Latin name.

Daffodils, a spring-blooming, self-propagating perennial, originated in Europe, predominantly Spain, Portugal, France and Austria, where they are native to meadows and woody forests, says the NGB. Some naturalized in Great Britain and from there, narcissus bulbs were introduced to North America.

• **Garden how-to's:**

Unlike many spring-flowering bulbs, daffodils are not eaten by mice, voles, squirrels, rabbits or deer because they are poisonous and distasteful, which helps to keep pets and children from ingesting them. Daffodils are great for picking and arranging in cut flower bouquets, and they are also perfect for container-planting and forcing.

The ideal daffodil planting time depends on the growing zone. In zones 3 to 5, it is recommended to plant in September to November.

• Bulb sizes are determined by the age of the bulb and also the division of the cultivar. Divisions 1 to 4 tend to be larger (14 to 16 centimeters or 16 to 18 centimeters in circumference) than division 5 to 7 (12 to 14 centimeters or 14 to 16 centimeters). Of course, miniatures are normally smaller-sized bulbs (8 to 10 centimeters or 10 to 12 centimeters).

• **Planting Instructions:**

Keeping bulb size in mind, daffodil bulbs should be spaced three times the width of the bulb apart, or four to six inches on center, depending on the size of the bulb. As for planting depth, daffodils should be planted three times the height of the bulb deep, or four to six inches to the bottom of the hole, depending on the size of the bulb. Planting in full sun is preferable, but partial shade (at least a half-day) is acceptable.

Digging and dividing is normally not necessary if the bulbs are planted in fertile soil, have sufficient water during the spring growing season, and if they get plenty of sunlight for six weeks after the blooms are finished. However, to divide them, do so as soon as the foliage begins to turn yellow. Dig under the whole clump with a spading fork, shake off the loose soil and carefully separate the roots of the large bulbs from one another. If daughter bulbs are attached to the mother bulbs, it's best to leave them together. They will separate underground when the time is right. The best choice is to replant bulbs immediately after digging; however, if storing is necessary, store dry in mesh

bags with plenty of air circulation.



Removing spent flowers is nice for aesthetic reasons, but because most hybrid daffodils have very little nectar and have heavy, distasteful pollen which is seldom spread by the wind or insects, few are accidentally pollinated.

Therefore, few produce real seeds that would drain the bulb's energy needed to produce next year's bloom, making it unnecessary to deadhead daffodils.

Hopefully your landscape is already or will soon be dotted with the cheerful blossoms, like Wordsworth's poem that celebrates: "...A host, of golden daffodils..." so you, too, can dance with the daffodils. Whether you chose heirloom varieties or any of the newer selections, you cannot go wrong when you go with daffodils.

Ice follies, the delicate-as-lace, but tough-as-nails daffodils, are well-suited to spring gardens here. (Photo by: Lynette L. Walther)