

Species Daffodils

January, 1998

What are species daffodils anyway? The dictionary says that a species is the fundamental category of taxonomic classification. Gardeners know species as plants that originated in the wild--in nature--and which are the building blocks for all the wonderful hybrids we grow.

All daffodils belong to the genus *Narcissus*. The terms daffodil and narcissus are interchangeable, daffodil being the common English name, and *Narcissus* the Latin, botanical name. The American Daffodil Society prefers that *Narcissus* be used for both singular and plural forms. Depending on which botanist you follow, there are 40 to 80 species of narcissus, as well as numerous subspecies, varieties, and wild hybrids. (There are also over 15,000 named man-made hybrids registered with the RHS, but they are beyond the scope of this article.) Most of them are native to Europe, primarily Spain and Portugal; and a few are natives of North Africa. The United States has no native narcissus. In some parts of the country, especially in the South, you might find daffodils which have become naturalized around former homesites. Most of these daffodils would probably fall into that group now called Historic or Heirloom Daffodils. But that's another story.

Most daffodils bloom in the spring, although there are several which bloom in the fall. Included in the fall-blooming group is the only green daffodil, *N. viridiflorus*. Yes, green. The plant has reed-like foliage with blooms of the same color, usually with several blooms per stem. Blooming size bulbs often have no leaves at all, sending up only a bloomstalk to nourish the plant for the following year. It has a musky fragrance. The miniature bloom is inconspicuous, and probably of interest only to daffodil collectors. I grow it in the coldframe, and dry it off over the summer. Still, bloom is erratic. It's found mainly in Morocco, with a few also found in Spain. You can see a photo of it in the International Bulb Society's Bulb Gallery (see links.)

Daffodils come in all sizes, from the three- to four-inch tall miniature trumpet blooms of *N. asturiensis* to *N. longispathus* which usually has two blooms to the stem, and can reach three feet in height.

The Paper White bulbs sold for forcing are descendants of, and very similar to, *N. papyraceus*. Does that give you a clue where the name "Paper White" came from? This species is usually all white, has fragrant blooms, and from twelve to twenty blooms per stem. *N. tazetta* is similar, but comes in yellow as well as white and yellow. These are plants of the Mediterranean area, from Spain and Portugal extending to Greece, as well as Algeria and Morocco. Friends tell me they bloom in California and Florida as early as December.

The Pseudonarcissus Section includes *N. asturiensis* and *N. longispathus* mentioned above, as well as *N. hispanicus*, *N. obvallaris*, and *N. pseudonarcissus*. These all have the general shape and coloring of the image that comes to mind when you mention "daffodils." Most in the Pseudonarcissus Section have yellow flowers, but there are some white ones and bicolors among them.

N. poeticus var. *recurvus* is known to many gardeners as "Pheasant's Eye." The plant comes to us from the mountains of Switzerland, and is usually the last to bloom in the garden. It has a wonderful fragrance. The petals are purest white, and the small cups are rimmed in red. As the majority of hybrids available to gardeners are descendants of one of the *N. poeticus* species crossed with daffodils from the Pseudonarcissus Section, this small red rim in the *N. poeticus* species contributed all the genetic material for color in today's modern daffodils.

N. jonquilla is a fragrant member of the clan. It is found only in Europe, seldom outside of Spain and Portugal. Most are plants of lowlands and river valleys. It often sends up foliage in the fall, and has been naturalized in many areas of the South. It has foliage that looks like wild onions, and inch-wide yellow blooms, borne three or four to an 8-inch stem.

The charming little "Angel's Tears," *N. triandrus* var. *triandrus*, is much loved, but difficult to come by, and sometimes difficult to grow. It seems to like drying off over the summer. Its pendent pose and one to three blooms with creamy-white reflexed petals per stem, make it easy to identify.

N. bulbocodium is readily available in garden stores in the fall. These little "hoop petticoats" add a bright note to the garden. In nature they grow where the water stands in the spring, but goes totally dry in the summer. So pick your planting site appropriately.

If you want to grow ANY plant species, you should determine the plant's requirements first. If you can't meet the requirements, don't try to grow the plant. Try the hybrids instead. They're usually more tolerant of growing conditions.

If you're interested in learning about the narcissus species, the book *Narcissus, A Guide to Wild Daffodils* is absolutely the best book available. It's written by John Blanchard, who has had extensive experience studying daffodils in their natural habitats, and published by the Alpine Garden Society, UK. It is also available from the American Daffodil Society. Contact them at Nliggett@compuserve.com