

The Early-Blooming Daffodils

April, 1998

How long is your daffodil season? In my zone 5-6 garden, I can usually have some daffodil in bloom from mid-March until mid-May. So that's about two months. I can count on an occasional bloom in the coldframe along about December, and maybe another one or two in February, but from mid-March on, I can usually find a new daffodil open on my daily walk around the garden.

If you live in a milder climate, you probably have a longer season. A friend in California recently told me she had something in bloom since October, and she still has buds coming on her latest daffodils. A friend in the panhandle area of Florida has a similar experience. And if you're lucky enough to live in Oregon or Ireland, you'll have the best season. Oregon and Ireland have the spring climate daffodils love—cool and wet. Most people love it when we have warm sunny weather in spring. Not me. I want it cool and wet! Or at least damp! This brings out the best color in the flowers.



No matter where you live, certain daffodils bloom earlier than others. My first blooms are always on miniature cultivars. You can get miniatures which begin the season, and other miniatures which end the season. The miniature trumpets 'Bagatelle' (pictured), 'Wee Bee' and 'Little Gem' always begin the season. These are so similar, it's hard to tell them apart. 'Small Talk' opens a few days later, and is distinctive with its spritely, starry perianth. The multi-headed 'Tête-a-Tête' adds to the early spring show. The early species crocus and helleborus hybrids might also be in bloom.

As a group, the cyclamineus hybrids bloom early, while the poeticus hybrids bloom late. Cyclamineus hybrids usually have swept-back petals—like a cyclamen, what else?—and come in various color combinations. One of the earliest to bloom is the all yellow 'Cornet'.

'Jetfire', 'Emperor's Waltz', and 'Dik Dik', yellow and orange, are joined by the all white 'Cazique'. 'Rapture' and 'Peeping Tom', both yellow and both winners of the American Daffodil Society Wister Award for garden excellence, follow soon after, along with the yellow 'Little Witch' and 'Swift Arrow'.



Perhaps the first of the trumpet daffodils to bloom is 'Rijnveld's Early Sensation'. Some trade catalogs refer to this all yellow flower as JANUARY. This blooms very early, and a friend in Tennessee does have it in bloom in January. Another early trumpet daffodil is 'Prologue' (pictured), with a white perianth and yellow cup. In a sheltered spot under trees, white and yellow 'Las Vegas' joins the show, while the refined 'Arctic Gold' joins in.

In the large-cupped daffodils, all white 'First Frost' planted in a wooded area blooms almost a week earlier than the same cultivar planted in full sun. 'Falstaff' and 'First Impression', both yellow and red, add to the show. The yellow, refined Tasmanian-bred 'Nynja' follows soon after, and is soon joined by American-bred 'Guinevere'.

Split-corona daffodils have their own special charm, and 'Trigonometry' with white petals and a pink cup adds variety of form and color to the early daffodil garden.

In my area, spring can be a roller-coaster ride of high and low temperatures. This year was certainly no exception. El Nino brought us a milder than usual winter, and growth was far advanced. It had all the indications of being the earliest daffodil season on record. Lows in February hardly dropped below the freezing mark. Disaster struck in early March, when temperatures dipped to 7°F for several days. Daffodils are pretty hardy, but a lot of foliage and stems were damaged. Actually, the buds show little damage, and now, almost three weeks later, the buds—lying on the ground--are trying to open. Obviously, this does not make for a pretty garden! But the good news is that the bulbs will be fine. Experience has taught us that while the frozen foliage will turn white and then dry up and look unsightly, the bulb will continue to grow; the foliage will lengthen and will make the food for next year's bloom. You can nip off the dry ends of the foliage, if you like, to make the garden tidier. Amazingly, some cultivars were not bothered at all by the low temperature. 'Sunny Maiden', a miniature new to my garden, was in bloom when the low temperature hit, and stood up through it all.

Even though some of the early blooms were lost, there will still be daffodils this year. The midseason and late daffodils should be just fine. This season has demonstrated once again that it's wise to choose cultivars for early, mid- and late season bloom.

For a list of daffodil specialists who sell by mail, see the American Daffodil Society home page. (see links)