

## HEIRLOOM, OR HISTORIC, DAFFODILS

May, 1998

The interest in historic, or heirloom, plants seems to be growing, and this interest extends to daffodils. Whether your interest is in restoring old gardens with plants compatible with the original planting, or you simply enjoy historic plants, you will find many daffodils fit the bill.

Is there a difference between “heirloom” and “historic”? Very little, I suppose, although to me an “heirloom” plant would be one of a certain age or older, while a “historic” plant could be one which figured prominently in some way as a milestone in the genus. For instance, ‘Falaise’ is a rather nondescript double daffodil, and yet it is historic because it was one of the first double daffodils that was found to be fertile. Its progeny live on in ever more beautiful double daffodils. ‘Quick Step’ is a white and pink jonquil hybrid which is historic, as it is one of the first jonquil hybrids which sets seed readily. This allows breeders to produce second and third generation hybrids which they had been unable to do previously. Neither of these plants fit the definition of “historic” as defined by the American Daffodil Society.

The American Daffodil Society recently approved the addition of an award to the best historic daffodil in the historic classes. “Historic” in this situation is defined as having been registered in 1940 or earlier. Species are not allowed. Personally, I think they should be older. But there are some lovely daffodils to be found in the historic section.

‘Sweetness,’ which was registered in 1939, is a yellow jonquil hybrid which usually comes with one bloom per stem. The bloom is about two inches in diameter and has a lovely jonquil fragrance. It’s a wonderful garden flower, and is an American Daffodil Society Wister Award winner. The Wister Award is for a flower of exceptional garden merit. ‘Sweetness’ frequently wins the Historic Ribbon, but it is equally at home in regular show classes.

Another frequent winner of the Historic Ribbon is ‘Beryl,’ a cyclamineus hybrid which opens with yellow petals and an orange cup. The petals soon fade to white, while the cup fades to yellow with an orange rim. ‘Beryl’ dates from 1907, and still finds a place in the gardens of daffodil enthusiasts.

Of course the most venerable name in all daffodildom, ‘King Alfred’, certainly fits this category. ‘King Alfred’ was registered in 1899. It is not a particularly good grower, and it is seldom listed in catalogues. Statistics from Holland for 1996-97 indicate that only .26 hectares of ‘King Alfred’ were being grown commercially. Many sources list King Alfred-type daffodils, but if you want the real thing, you’ll probably have to search for firms which specialize in heirloom plants.



'Grey Lady' (pictured) from 1935 is a lovely smallish plant with white petals and a cup edged in pink or a pale cerise. It blooms late in the daffodil season, and has the form which can still win on the show bench. It's been growing in my garden for years, and is always a source of pleasure.

Some of the double daffodils from the 1700s had fanciful names like the yellow and orange 'Butter and Eggs', which was sometimes called 'Poached Egg'. 'Eggs and Bacon', 'Fried Eggs', and 'Orange Phoenix' all referred to the same white and orange flower. In the 1800s, we had the white and yellow 'Codlins and Cream', also called 'Sulphur Phoenix'. Their form is not what is expected in modern hybrids, but they have an informal charm all their own. Also from the 1800s, we have 'Grand Primo', 'Grand Primo Citroniere' and 'Grand Monarque' (pictured), which are all tazettas and should thrive in warmer climates than my zone 5-6 garden. These are beautiful flowers, with up to fifteen blooms per stem, which have the added bonus of fragrance.



I'm probably growing 25-35 historic cultivars in my garden. Many of them are tazetta or poeticus hybrids. I'm not growing them for their historic value, but for the beauty they provide in my garden each spring.

If you're interested in acquiring historic bulbs, you should contact Scott Kunst, who operates as Old House Gardens. You can reach him at [OHGBulbs@aol.com](mailto:OHGBulbs@aol.com). The Daffodil Mart, 7463 Heath Trail, Gloucester, VA 23061 includes some historic among their other offerings. Tazetta specialist Bill Welch, P.O. Box 1736, Carmel Valley, CA 93924-1736 offers the "Grands" listed above as well as other tazetta daffodils. Now is the time to contact them for catalogs.