

Some Daffodil History

January, 2002

Sitting by a nice warm fire, with a good daffodil book . . . what could be better on a cold winter evening? The unseasonably warm autumn ended almost exactly on the date the calendar says is the first day of winter. Did someone turn the switch? At any rate, winter has arrived.

Since there's not much to be done in the garden these days, it's a good time to curl up with a good book. It's fun to read the older, out-of-print books to see what was going on in the daffodil world years ago. Daffodil hybridizing began in the latter part of the 19th century, and one of the earliest books in my collection is a reprint of Peter Barr's little booklet, *Ye Narcissus or Daffodyl Flowre, and hys Roots*, which was published in 1884. The first part of this slim volume contains a lecture delivered before The Royal Horticultural Society in 1884 by Mr. F.W. Burbidge who was at that time curator of the Trinity College Botanic Gardens in Dublin. The lecture dealt with a bit of the history of daffodils, and says that "We have in all about twenty species of narcissus which are known to exist in a wild state," and lists the countries where they may be found. These days a listing of species, subspecies, and wild hybrids would number over 250.

Classification at that time included three main divisions: the Magnicoronati, or "Coffee-Cup" Section, the Mediicoronati, or "Tea-Cup" Section, and the Parvicoronati, or "Tea-Saucer" Section. The divisions were then divided into "flat-leaved" and "rush-leaved" sections. Aren't you glad we now have Trumpet, Large Cup, and Small Cup Divisions?

Mr. Burbidge suggests cutting daffodils for indoor decoration or to send to friends when the blooms are in what's called the "gooseneck" stage; that is the bud is no longer facing straight up, but has turned down and is showing color. He says, "You may send fifty or sixty Daffodil buds in a comparatively small box for a few pence."

Culture, he says, "Generally is of the most simple kind, and one of the most pleasing of all the spring effects in our gardens is absent where they are not. . . . for, as some one well said, a group of golden Daffodils on the young grass is as 'sunshine in a shady place.'"

Speaking of double daffodils, he says regarding *N. poeticus*, "Of all the double forms of Narcissus, this is the most strikingly beautiful, in purity and sweetness rivalling even the flowers of a Gardenia."

There is a short section on The Poetry of the Daffodil which includes Wordsworth's "Ode to Daffodils" and Shakespeare's oft quoted allusion to the ". . . Daffodils That come before the swallow dares, and take The winds of March with beauty."

It was at this conference in 1884 that a proposal was adopted that “garden varieties of Narcissi, whether known hybrids or natural seedlings, should be named or numbered in the manner adopted by Florists, and not in the manner adopted by Botanists.” Subsequently a committee was appointed to revise the names of new daffodils which resulted in the use of popular names for the Latin ones which had been in use. Thank goodness!!

The last part of the book is given over to a “Compleat List of all the Kindes grown in Englishe Gardines” and is “embellished with manie woodcuts.” Indeed it’s the woodcuts that make this booklet so charming, with drawings which clearly show the gracefulness of these early flowers.

So, I’ve had a pleasant evening with my book, and tomorrow the ashes from the fire can go on my daffodils. Everyone’s happy.

You can look for this little booklet on eBay or any of the booksellers online. Look in their out-of-print section. An original will probably be expensive, but the reprint published by The American Daffodil Society in 1968 should be more reasonable.