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14 RHS golds and still going strong: the father-and-son doyens of daffodils on how they became 'Master Growers'



Adrian and Ron Scamp at their nursery CREDIT: JASON INGRAM

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24 MARCH 2019 • 10:30AM

Daffodils are a sure-fire sign of spring, spilling gaily across road verges and out of florists' buckets. On show benches around the country, too, they are glowing in the spotlight so, as a confirmed bulb-lover, I caught up with the doyens of daffodils, Ron and Adrian Scamp. The father-and-son team are returning to the RHS Flower Show Cardiff, following 14 previous consecutive gold medals, and have been honoured with the title "Master Grower".

Brought up on his uncle's daffodil farm in the Tamar Valley, Ron's love affair with the genus narcissus began young. "We harvested the old-fashioned type of daffodil, smaller and more delicate than the commercial varieties today," he says. "I have wonderful memories of the flower fields and bunching sheds."

His interest in breeding was sparked by visiting shows with Dan du Plessis, his uncle and mentor, and, despite pursuing a career in retail management, Ron continued to create hybrid daffodils for showing. Meanwhile, he collected the heritage varieties that were slipping out of sight.

"People thought I was nuts, but today we are the leading supplier of old-fashioned daffodils," he says, with a certain pride. Heritage daffodils are technically varieties over 50 years old but some date from much earlier, such as 'Seagull', 'Bath's Flame' and 'Horace', introduced in the early 1890s. "There is an ethereal beauty about them, but I like to think that they are almost indestructible," Ron says.

Given a well-drained spot in sun or dappled shade, and plenty of water when in growth, daffodils are easy garden plants. The main flowering season is March to April, but newer cultivars extend this, and 'Rijnveld's Early Sensation' can flower before Christmas. It helps to get the bulbs into the ground by the end of October and allow the foliage to die back naturally. In the garden, I have found that taller varieties are best grown in a sheltered spot, or through a matrix of supporting perennials and low shrubs.

Older daffodils are graceful, dainty and fluttering, far more evocative of poetry-inspiring floral hosts than of municipal block planting, and they are particularly effective when grown in a naturalistic setting. Which, coincidentally, is where Ron acquired much of his collection.



Narcissus 'Seagull' CREDIT: JASON INGRAM

In the past, huge numbers of spring blooms would be cut in the Cornish flower fields and sent to market in London. But the need for agricultural land and the loss of manpower during the Second World War led to bulb collections being dumped or abandoned, then superseded by newer hybrid varieties.

Ron became adept at spotting older daffodils clinging on in hedges, or on scraps of land, and found that people were often willing to swap a few bulbs for something newer. "If you are invited to old houses, you can often find heritage varieties, and a lot of people sent me bulbs, too," he says.

"I started breeding as a hobby and for exhibition, but it became a bit of an obsession. I visited Barbara Fry and Andrew Tompsett at Rosewarne Experimental Horticulture Station – I think I was the only amateur allowed on the place, with my camera and my little sachets of pollen.

"They introduced me to breeding modern daffodils and gave me pollen designed for developing commercial flowers. But as a show-grower I didn't want my plants necessarily to be commercial. I wanted them to be better"

To breed the best

Breeding daffodils, whether for showing or commercially, is highly specialised. Specimens with desirable characteristics are chosen and the female stigma fertilised with a known pollen parent. The flower is emasculated and then isolated to make sure that there is no pollen cross-contamination.



'Cape Cornwall' GAP PHOTOS

The F1 seeds are variable as they represent the recombined DNA of both parents. The most improved individuals are selected, and crossed or backcrossed with a parent, to develop these qualities further.

"You set out with the idea of improving a certain strain. For example, to get a better standard of double or a new colour break," says Ron Scamp, whose line of improved split corolla show daffodils, including 'Max', 'Menehay' and 'Jack Wood', is a step up from past examples.

The holy grail is to breed something that is distinctive, reliable and disease-resistant. "You want a plant that will look good and grow well – and if it wins a few prizes, then that is a bonus. If you can sell it in bunches in Marks & Spencer, that's an even bigger bonus," Ron says cheerfully. And although he does not shout about it, the top three daffodils in the exhibition world, 'Centenary Gold', 'Cape Cornwall' and 'Polgooth' are all his doing.

"I bred from the best of my own collection and from the best plants that I could get my hands on, although I never hybridised the heritage daffodils," explains Ron. "Then I introduced the species daffodils, *N. jonquilla*, *N. poeticus*, *N. triandrus* and *N. cyclamineus*, into the line to get new shapes and colours into those classifications. Some hybrids were quite stunning.

"If you choose the parents carefully, the success rate is pretty good, but if you just splosh pollen from any old thing around, you get any old results. You have an idea of what you want and what you are going to get – but I'm afraid someone up above has the final say!

In 1990, the collection stood at 800 cultivars, so Ron and his wife, Maureen, bit the bullet, printed a catalogue and Scamp's Daffodils was born. Their son, Adrian, joined them in 2007 and he is similarly enthusiastic. "I had been surrounded by daffodils all my life," says Adrian. "As a younger man, you do your own thing, but the opportunity arose to run the business and I thought, why not? It is a wonderful lifestyle. You perhaps might not get rich, but you enjoy the life that you have."

The RHS register lists more than 30,000 daffodils, each assigned to one of 13 divisions. With so much material, Adrian's interest is less to do with breeding and more about building and curating the collection. "Daffodils are so diverse; I like to find the ones that already exist, across the world," he explains. "I want to maintain them for the future, be they old or new."

Yet Ron is still introducing new varieties and his latest work includes 'Keith Owen', named for the gentleman who bequeathed a million daffodils to Sidmouth, and beautiful, all-white 'Bishop of St Germans', after the 10th century bishopric.



Narcissus 'Polgooth' CREDIT: CLIVE NICHOLS

Possibilities for more accurate bulb identification emerged recently when scientists at the RHS and the University of Reading announced that they had sequenced the genes in daffodil chloroplasts. Discovering variety-specific genetic markers could indicate the different types of flower. “It will be useful in ascertaining if one of the ‘historics’ is incorrect,” Ron says. “There is a long way yet to go, however.”

Despite stellar performances to date, and more than 2,500 varieties to choose from, Ron and Adrian are still finalising their RHS Cardiff display. Weather and luck will play a part. “The Cornish season is early but many flowers have been destroyed by the terrible weather,” Ron says. “We hire a portable cool-room, so we can keep anything at peak condition for a couple of weeks.

“We have also been awarded the Lawrence Medal, which is the highest award for any exhibit in any show in any given year.” That exhibit contained 170 vases each with nine immaculate, matching daffodils; a different variety in each vase. “We put it all together and stood back. I said to Adrian, ‘Well, that’s the best I’ve seen,’ and it turned out that the RHS agreed.”

The RHS Flower Show Cardiff, April 12-14 ([rhs.org.uk/cardiff](https://www.rhs.org.uk/shows-events/rhs-flower-show-cardiff) (<https://www.rhs.org.uk/shows-events/rhs-flower-show-cardiff>)). Scamp's Daffodils (qualitydaffodils.com (<https://qualitydaffodils.com/>)).