

Daffodils herald spring — and history — in Gloucester and Matthews



Fields of daffodils still bloom in Gloucester each spring. (Brent and Becky's Bulbs)

By **Wilford Kale**

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Early Virginia settlers brought daffodil bulbs with them from England as “soft reminders of English springs” when they established Gloucester County in 1651 and its later offspring Mathews County. Today, nearly 370 years later those legendary yellow blossoms are celebrated with an annual Daffodil Festival.

There is, however, much to the daffodils, or narcissus story. Early on, the plants were found throughout the colonies, but the soil and weather conditions of Gloucester and Mathews “were ideal,” for abundant cultivation, according to Carol Ray in her 1991 short history of the daffodil in the two counties.

Historically, daffodil bulbs found their way from neighbor to neighbor and from cultivated garden plots to fields — where, by the early 20th Century, they grew wild on unattended land. Some say they thrived on neglect. Two aspects of the area’s daffodils evolved: the commercial flower business and the Gloucester Daffodil Festival that celebrates its 33rd year this spring.

The commercial potential for the blossoms was first envisioned by Eleanor Linthicum Smith who lived at “Toddsbury” on the North River. She cultivated large beds of daffodils, and in the spring growing season she paid school children ten cents

per hundred to pick them. They were packed and shipped to Baltimore via steamboats because there was no railroad in the area.

The profits from the daffodils paid the mortgage on Mrs. Smith's home, and gradually, neighbors and county friends began to realize money could be made from the yellow blossoms. Between 1925 and 1945, Mrs. Smith's granddaughter and her husband put five children through college on daffodil money.

By 1937 the Gloucester-Mathews Narcissus Growers Association was formed by about 38 farmers who were then actively cultivating the daffodils that would be picked annually around Eastertide to be shipped northward to flower markets in Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City and other nearby communities

The daffodil growing business escalated and for many decades — from the 1930s to the 1980s. "Picking daffodils was as much a part of the economic life of Gloucester and Mathews as was pulling fish and shellfish from the bay," according to an April 1938 edition of the Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal newspaper. During this era, Gloucester and Mathews counties were proclaimed "The Daffodil Capital of America."

Back then up to 75,000 boxes of cut flowers were shipped annually. A box usually held 40 bunches of 10 stems each—or 400 flowers per box. According to Ray the prominent names in the Gloucester-Mathews daffodil industry were Heath, Hicks, Hammer, Hopkins, Emory, Clements and lastly Ingram. In fact, Charles Ingram of Mathews was the last shipper of Gloucester-Mathews daffodils.

In a recent interview, Ingram, now 88, said he quit shipping about 10 to 12 years ago and in his last years sent between 4,000 to 5,000 boxes to flower dealers in New York City and Washington.

"At one time my dealer at 28th street in New York bought 75 percent of my flowers," he explained. "By that time the dealers didn't want the blooming flowers, but rather the buds" that would blossom in their shops or markets. "Sometimes, I had a truck going to New York three times a week. "I was then able to ship 60 buds per bunch and save a little money," explained Ingram who began with daffodils in about 1967. By 1978 he had rented the fields of Allan Hicks of Dutton and had about 125 acres under cultivation.

Today, some Gloucester and Mathews residents who still have some acres of daffodils will bring them in the spring to sell in Williamsburg or sometimes Richmond and Norfolk, but the big market is gone, done away by flowers from the West Coast and Europe that could be marketed cheaper than Virginia flowers.

Although the daffodil industry is gone, the blossoms still grow in abundance in gardens and or fields and will again inspire this year's Daffodil Festival presented April 6, 2-5 p.m. and April 7 noon-6 p.m.

At least 10,000 people attend the festival, and on a good day the crowd could approach 20,000. There is something for everyone. The 10 a.m. parade will kick off the festivities. There also will be a 5K and Fun Run, games and rides, face painting and costumed characters for children and the Daffodil Queen will be crowned, a tradition since 1990.

Over 150 vendors are expected, including crafts, artists, jewelers and daffodils themselves. There also will be a food court with hot dogs and hamburgers, soft serve ice cream, pizza, BBQ and "deep fried everything."

Always a highlight is a tour of Brent & Becky's – the nationally known daffodil bulb store and gardens. The Heaths, the owners, are third generation daffodil growers and specialize in a wide variety of them. There is a charge for the tour at 7900 Daffodil Lane that also includes a history of daffodils in Gloucester.

Elsa Cooke Verbyla, publisher of Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal, contributed to this story.

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