

The rich history of the Daffodil

The nodding yellow or orange trumpets now in your garden or neighbourhood have a rich history - spiritual, military and symbolic.



BY

PETER SHIRLEY

• 11:26, 14 MARCH 2019



Daffodils in bloom (Image: Peter Byrne/PA Wire)

Here we are in Lent, hence the old name for daffodils: Lenten lilies. For many they are the first truly spring flower, appearing just after the winter snowdrops and crocuses. There are thousands of cultivars and varieties, but public authorities seem to favour the

largest sorts, their big yellow trumpets festooning road verges, traffic islands and local green patches. Wordsworth's '*Host of golden daffodils*' was the much smaller and less pretentious wild daffodil.

Being the most abundant and conspicuous flower now it is not surprising that they figure in many of the season's traditional activities. They are part of many Easter celebrations, including the practice of decorating churches and churchyards with daffodils on Palm Sunday. And they make up many a child's Mothering Sunday bouquet.

Daffodils are, of course, associated with Wales. This is probably because they are closely related to, but much more attractive, than an older Welsh symbol, the leek. Another name for them is Peter's Leek. The leek's status was secured during an ancient battle, when, presumably lacking any sort of uniform, the Welsh soldiers each wore a leek to distinguish them from the enemy. According to Shakespeare this tradition was continued at Agincourt, where the Welsh archers wore leeks. Daffodils also conveniently start to flower round about the 1 March, St David's Day.

Well known personalities have helped to secure the daffodil's place in Welsh life. David Lloyd George, our only Welsh Prime Minister, advocated their use as a national symbol, and the future King George V wore a daffodil at his investiture as Prince of Wales. These days the current Prince of Wales, through the Duchy of Cornwall, levies rents of one daffodil for lands in the Scilly Isles, rather than the more usual 'peppercorn rent'. He obviously does not know the old superstition that it is bad luck to give but a single daffodil. More usefully, daffodils are grown commercially in Wales to provide the drug galantamine, used to treat Alzheimer's disease.

Their scientific name of *Narcissus* comes from the Greek for deep sleep and is related to the word narcotic. This is because the bulbs contain a toxic alkaloid which gives relief from pain and induces unconsciousness. It is said that Roman soldiers carried daffodil bulbs to chew on to mask the pain if they were wounded. So, those nodding yellow or orange trumpets now in your garden or neighbourhood have a rich history - spiritual, military and symbolic.