

In this Lynchburg garden, a love of daffodils blooms

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Master gardener and retired dermatologist Janet Hickman in her daffodil garden filled with over 1,400 flowers on March 22, 2019
Emily Elconin

Janet Hickman is nuts about daffodils.

The retired dermatologist grows over 1,800 different types in her expansive backyard off Rivermont Avenue and competes in several daffodil shows around the country each year.

As she strolls through her gardens on a sunny March morning, Hickman plucks a small flower that has just bloomed and begins to describe the perfect show flower.

“It’s going to be oriented so it’s standing straight up with its petals straight up,” she explained as she twirled the stem to inspect the petal’s details. “Its pose is going to be good. It’s going to be at a right angle or looking right at you ... and it shouldn’t have any little nicks or tears or such. The cup should be nice and round. It should have a good, clean stem that’s straight and strong.”

After a couple minutes spent analyzing all aspects of the flower and finding a small tear in the bottom petal, Hickman determines it’s not a “show” daffodil.

“I’d look at that that little nick and say ‘There’s a better one in there somewhere,’” she said.



A view of a portion of Janet Hickman's daffodil garden in Lynchburg filled with over 1,400 flowers on March 22, 2019.

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With thousands of popcorn-yellow, bright lemon and canary-colored daffodils blanketing several garden beds and most of her yard, Hickman has plenty to choose from.

When Hickman and her husband moved into their home over 30 years ago, they bought a bucket of 500 daffodils and planted them in a forested area of their yard.

The home also had a hillside sprinkled with pockets of historic daffodils Hickman said have been on the property for over 100 years.

Although she has always enjoyed the flowers, Hickman said her “total immersion” in the world of daffodils started about 10 years ago when her garden club was responsible for hosting the Garden Club of Virginia daffodil show for two years.

“That put me into the deep water about learning about shows, about daffodils, how they’re classified and I just found it was lots of fun,” she said. “I liked the people. It’s a combination of science and history and beauty and

fun.”



A view of a portion of the daffodil garden filled with over 1,400 flowers on March 22, 2019.

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Hickman’s hobby keeps her busy year-round. She plots all plantings in a detailed spreadsheet that lays the daffodils out in grids and keeps meticulous bloom records with the location of each flower, when they’re supposed to bloom, whether they bloomed last year and the bloom date this year.

Additionally, Hickman said, there’s weeding, ordering, planting, record-keeping, traveling to shows and serving as a daffodil judge as well as duties in several garden clubs. She is a member of the local Hillside Garden Club, the Garden Club of Virginia and serves as second vice president for the American Daffodil Society.

On the March stroll around her yard and gardens, Hickman said she was still looking for the perfect flower to take to her next show.

“Sometimes I will spend those hours picking and planning then one quick walk through the yard as I’m getting into the car and that’s when I pick the one that gets the gold ribbon — literally,” she said.



Master gardener and retired dermatologist Janet Hickman surveys her garden for any eligible daffodils for the competition on March 28, 2019.

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She's won scores of first-place ribbons while showing and has won three best in show ribbons.

The best part of her year is attending daffodil shows, Hickman said.

"...Your first show, you go because of the flowers," she said. "After that, you go because of the people."

She said the world of those who are obsessed with daffodils is pretty small.

"There's something about being crazy about daffodils that means you're kind of a fun person," she said laughing.



Master gardener and retired dermatologist Janet Hickman prepares her flowers for a daffodil competition March 28, 2019.

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With her years of experience, Hickman's fellow Hillside Garden Club members Janie Vaughan and Leigh Barth said she's always willing to help novices at daffodil shows.

Vaughan said her friend is kind enough to share her knowledge with those who are not as familiar with the process.

“There might be people who walk into the workroom with a handful of blooms who don’t know the names and she’ll go over and try to help them,” Vaughan said. “She’s really good about helping people get started and do their best.”

Both Vaughan and Barth recounted a story demonstrating Hickman’s commitment.

“She went to a show in California and carried flowers with her on the plane that were conditioned and transported in a way that would keep them alive and then she won ribbons at the California show,” Barth said. “She’s very serious about it for sure.”



Master gardener and retired dermatologist Janet Hickman prepares her flowers for a daffodil competition March 28, 2019.

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Vaughan added that Hickman hand-carried the flowers through security because she couldn’t bring them in their typical water bottle vessels due to TSA regulations. Once she got on the plane, she put them in water and nurtured them through the flight.

This attention to detail is in Hickman’s DNA.

“My son explained it to me that it allows me to enjoy my obsessive-compulsive parts as well as my artistic parts,” she said.

During peak bloom season, from February through April, Hickman works with her daffodils several hours a day.

“I’m out here because I like to be out here and I want to see whose blooming and talk to them,” she said as she bent down to survey a bud.

However, in general, Hickman said daffodils don’t need a lot of care. They will grow on old homesteads where the house is falling down and no one has lived for decades. She cited patches of blooms around Lynchburg — “stray little clumps of yellow” that no one has cultivated for years, but they survive.

“They just make you happy,” Hickman said when asked why she loves daffodils. “They’re used for cancer recovery; they’re used for resilience. ... They raise your spirits; they’re scientifically interesting and they have histories.”

She said the universal appeal of the bright blooms is what draws many people into the wild world of daffodils — even when they aren’t expecting it.

“This condition is contagious,” she said laughing.

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Master gardener and retired dermatologist Janet Hickman walks through her garden for a last-minute check before a daffodil competition March 28, 2019.

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