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ALERT TOP STORY

Don't have a green thumb? Try bulbs!

Alma Gaul
Jan 18, 2020



The daffodil 'Barenywn' explodes in masses of yellow.

Alma Gaul

When Brent Heath comes to Moline in February to explain how **bulb plants** can bring **season-long color** and beauty to your garden, rest assured that he knows what he is talking about.

Heath's grandfather started in the daffodil bulb business around 1900 in the Tidewater region of Virginia, where the family story is part of the area's industrial and cultural heritage.

Heath and his wife Becky are the third generation in the bulb business, selling nationally — even internationally — through Brent and Becky's Bulbs, which now includes many other kinds of bulbs and plants in addition to daffodils.

On Saturday, Feb. 29, Heath will be the keynote speaker at the 23rd Annual Nursery School: Lessons in Gardening symposium, being held this year for the first time at the Bartlett Performing Arts Center at Moline High School.

The symposium also includes 16 other classes; participants can choose four. They fall into the categories of make-and-take, ornamental, edible and nature. Topics include composting, children and nature, growing various berries, geraniums and a make-and-take session of planting succulents in a four-inch pot.

Heath's keynote titled "bulbs as companion plants" will explain, through slides, how to weave bulbs into the tapestry of a garden that also includes perennials, annuals, ground covers and flowering shrubs.

In addition, he will present one of the ornamental breakout sessions titled "tropical paradise gardening and care of summer bulbs" that will touch on container plantings, the tropical look and evening gardens with luminescent, light-colored flowers.

Bulbs have been described as the perfect plant material because if you put them in the ground in the right place (and the right side up), they will produce beautiful flowers, no green thumb required.

The motto "Plant bulbs and harvest smiles" is inscribed on the sign outside the Heaths' store in Virginia, and its proprietor is all about beauty and positivity.

"I want to convince people that they should be playing in the garden rather than working in the garden," the 74-year-old Heath said in a phone interview.

"Gardening is meant to be fun," he told a reporter for the website everybodygardens. "I can help people enjoy their own lives. We need to have more happiness in our world. We need to look for the positives and gardening is such a great positive."

The daffodil story

And Heath is proud to tell the story, often recounted, about how his grandfather got started with daffodils, an interest that had a major and lasting impact on his part of Virginia.

Heath's grandfather, Charles, was a wealthy man living in New York. One morning he was served a breakfast cantaloupe so delicious that he spent the rest of the day tracking down its origin from corner grocery to wholesaler to the grower in Virginia.

Heath corresponded with the farmer and eventually visited him. There Heath's interest in cantaloupes was permanently side-tracked by the beautiful daffodils he saw growing wild across untended fields that had lost their fertility.

These flowers came from bulbs first brought to the area in the 1600s by early settlers. Apparently the Virginia soil was conducive to daffodils, as the bulbs naturalized, or spread.

Heath moved to Virginia, buying an old antebellum plantation, and began planting daffodils. These included some Dutch bulbs he bought from a New York import house. Heath tried to convince other farmers in the area that they could make money by raising showy daffodils to sell as cut flowers in the New York market.

Some families already were growing daffodils to sell as cut flowers, but they did not pick up on Heath's advice to plant showier bulbs until after 1926. That's when a microscopic worm began eating daffodil bulbs in Holland, and the United States government clamped down on imports lest the pest spread to the United States.

With their business at stake, the New York importers contacted Heath to see if he could become a new supplier. He did, and, in time, other families began raising these showier varieties as well.

The last restrictions on Dutch bulbs were lifted just before World War II, but by then many farmers in Gloucester and Mathews counties had established themselves and their markets. In the 1930s and '40s, Gloucester County became the self-proclaimed "Daffodil Capital of America," according to the website gloucesterva.info/pr.

"In 1938, George Heath (son of Charles Heath) established the Daffodil Mart (now Brent and Becky's Bulbs). He fell in love with the work and experimented with all the varieties he could get. He is credited with having brought more different varieties into this county than anyone else and, by 1952, had a total of 1,400 varieties," according to the website.

"Ultimately more than 150 families were growing flowers. Eventually this overproduction, rising costs and competition from cut flowers brought in by air freight from around the globe caused prices to fall. A slow decline began as daffodil farming was abandoned by many.

The Heaths are still growing.

"Today the country's major daffodil region is Washington State which has a longer, cooler growing season, that helps the flowers thrive."

But Brent and Becky remain on their 28-acre farm, with a fourth generation already on board. And there still is a spring Daffodil Festival, begun by Becky Heath and now sponsored by the Gloucester Department of Parks and Recreation.

Bulbs are in their blood.

sunlight sensation



"Sunlight Sensation" is aptly named.

Alma Gaul



"Barrett Browning" features white petals with an orange center.

Alma Gaul



"Altun ha" offers a muted yellow with white centers.

Alma Gaul

barenwyn



The daffodil 'Barenywn' explodes in masses of yellow.

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Brent Heath

IF YOU GO

What: 23rd Annual Nursery School: Lessons in Gardening Symposium on Leap Day, including a keynote speaker, your choice of 4 classes, lunch and a vendor area. (For more information, see Page XX)

When: 8:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 29. Doors open at 8 a.m. with coffee and rolls; the welcome and keynote beings at 8:30 a.m.

Where: Bartlett Performing Arts Center at Moline High School.

How much: \$45 through Jan. 31, increasing to \$55 on Feb. 1. Registration deadline is Feb. 23; no walk-ins will be accepted.

To register: go.illinois.edu/NurserySchool2020 or 309-756-9978.

Produced by: University of Illinois Extension and Master Gardeners from Henry, Mercer, Rock Island and Stark counties.