

## **American Daffodil Society 2019 Gold Medal Nomination for Bill Welch By Kirby Fong**

The American Daffodil Society Gold Medal for Meritorious Service may be awarded once each year and in the words of the ADS By-laws: “The Gold Medal of the American Daffodil Society shall be awarded to an individual deemed by the Honors Committee as being worthy of “recognition of creative work of a pre-eminent nature in the understanding and advancement of daffodils.”

Our honoree is an important or powerful person in a specific business. This is the definition of a baron. Our Gold Medal honoree goes by the title “Bulb Baron.”

Bill the Bulb Baron as he's often called, was captivated with the Single Chinese Narcissus growing in his back yard as a child, especially when no one knew much about them. He was amazed by their ability to thrive on neglect. The clumps of single and double Chinese we see growing everywhere show us how drought tolerant Tazetta Narcissus are, making them an ideal plant for the Monterey Peninsula.

Today, all of Bill's waking moments are spent working in the field digging, growing, picking and hybridizing Narcissus. He decided to grow Tazetta Narcissus bulbs for a living, so he would be able to work on hybridizing them every chance he got. Since no one else seemed interested in preserving the old varieties that still exist, he has made it his mission in life to collect as many as he can find. At his field in Carmel Valley one can see the largest collection of Tazetta Narcissus in the world. He uses many of these varieties for pollinations to create new types of Narcissus. His goal is to develop varieties with different shaped cups, different colors, double petals, and also varieties that have different fragrances, different seasons of bloom and ones that multiply well in the garden.

Some of the most vigorous of the 18th century tazettas are still with us -- like Grand Monarque and Soleil d'Or. In our time, several hybridizers have turned their attention to tazettas, none more active than Bill Welch. According to DaffSeek, Bill has registered 63 Division 8 cultivars and 5 Division 4 cultivars (with tazetta parentage).

Among the more interesting colors in Bill's new tazettas are 'Carra's Favorite' 8W-OOY, 'Marisol' 8W-O which has a yellow wire rim, and 'Hilary Marea' 8W-Y with a white wire rim. One of Bill's Division 4 beauties is 'Deluna' 4Y-YYO and is typically a twin floreted double.

By doubling the chromosome number of several tazettas, Bill was able to improve the size of the florets, make the cultivars more robust, and extend the range of fertile tazettas capable of breeding. Until then, for example the Chinese Sacred

Lily (*N. tazetta* var. *orientalis*) was sterile and the number of useful tazettas was limited. In the quest for earlier blooming tazettas, he has bred autumn-blooming tazettas and late blooming tazettas. In short, Bill is at the forefront of a revival in tazetta breeding.

In recognition for his creation of beautiful new tazettas and his Tazetta Talk articles spreading the knowledge of tazetta daffodils, the American Daffodil Society should confer on Bill Welch its Gold Medal.

Some of the most vigorous of the 18th century tazettas are still with us -- like Grand Monarque and Soleil d'Or. A DaffSeek search for Division 8 cultivars before 1900 yields over 500 cultivars, showing how popular this form of daffodil used to be. In our time several hybridizers have turned their attention to tazettas, none more active than Bill Welch. DaffSeek shows 63 Division 8 cultivars and 5 Division 4 cultivars (with tazetta parentage) registered by Bill.

Yellow cups:

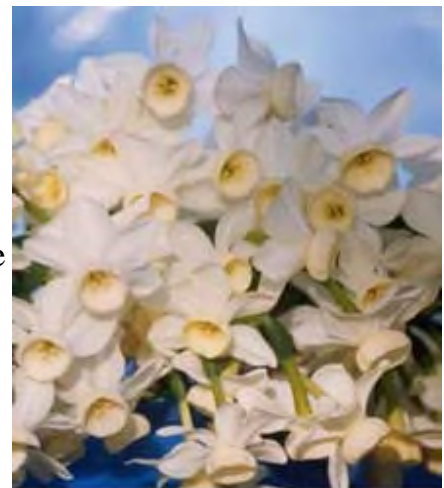
Driving down the Big Sur coast on Highway 1, in the month of February, I notice clusters of white and orange flowers that look like tiny daffodils sprouting up from the green carpet of a cow pasture. I can't help but stop to get a closer look even though the rain is coming down in sheets. I climb carefully through the barbed wire fence to retrieve a few of the rain soaked blossoms and my efforts are rewarded by a wonderful fragrance similar to those of orange blossoms. Some ranchers in a truck slow down, peering through the gray, trying to see if I'm doing anything wrong. I hold up my pitiful bouquet of drenched flowers and they wave back, driving on. Luckily, crazy trespassers picking flowers in their pasture isn't their first concern on a rainy Monday afternoon.

Since then, I have learned a lot about these wonderful flowers. The flowers are in the daffodil family, and are commonly referred to as Tazetta Narcissus. Tazetta means "little cups" in Italian which is an accurate description. As for the name narcissus, according to Greek Mythology, the god Narcissus was turned into a flower that eternally stares into a pool of water as punishment for his vanity. In Greece these flowers are commonly found growing near pools of water and since the flowers naturally face down, it appears as though they are staring at their own reflections. The main difference between daffodils and Tazetta Narcissus is that Tazetta Narcissus are smaller flowered and more fragrant than daffodils. Tazettas also have clusters of three to 15 flowers per stem rather than one large flower like daffodils. There can even be up to 30 flowers per stem in some cases and because Tazetta Narcissus have many flowers per stem, another name for them is Polyanthus Narcissus.

The variety we see scattered in cow pastures and along old roads was brought to our area by Chinese immigrants during the Gold Rush and is called Single Chinese or Chinese Sacred Lily. The flowers are used in the Chinese New Year's Celebrations and are considered sacred. It is believed that the Single Chinese Narcissus were spread East by the Silk Route, since the flowers are found growing all along it. They also grow along the coasts and rivers of China, possibly being spread by traders or perhaps by floods. There is also a form of Single Chinese that has double petals, which is called Double Chinese or Double Roman. The reference to Rome comes from the fact that the varieties are believed to be native to the Mediterranean area and were actually spread to surrounding areas of the Mediterranean by Roman soldiers, hence the name "Double Roman". Apparently, the bulbs help relieve muscle pain and are so poisonous they were used to end the life of suffering soldiers who were wounded badly and going to die. This same poison is what keeps gophers and deer from eating them.

Everyone seems to recognize the yellow King Alfred Daffodils which became a popular garden flower in the early 20th century. When I talk about Narcissus most people think of paperwhites, but there are other wonderful varieties as well. Also, few people realize that the Tazetta Narcissus at one time experienced as much popularity as Daffodils do now. As early as the 17th century the Dutch and English discovered Tazetta Narcissus and began collecting wild varieties to use for hybridizing. Large quantities of these wild bulbs were gathered, decimating the native populations. Later, during the 18th century the popularity of the new hybrid Tazettas soared, to the point that they were almost as popular as tulips. By 1890, 200 different Tazetta varieties were listed and, by 1907, there were 75 named garden varieties. Unfortunately, an unusual combination of events wiped out all of the newer hybrids the Dutch had in their collection. World War I had begun, which made it necessary for the flower growers in Holland to switch cultivation over to food crops. There were two very harsh winters in the Netherlands at this time as well, which killed off many of the tender bulbs. Also during this time the King Alfred Daffodil was introduced, which quickly gained popularity with gardeners in Europe since it was more cold hardy than Tazetta Narcissus. The Tazetta hybrids the Dutch had been working with when this disaster struck had never been sold or planted anywhere else as far as we know, so the varieties we do have are all very old. There are about 30 Tazetta varieties in existence today and only about five varieties available in most bulb catalogues.

Almost nobody is hybridizing Tazetta Narcissus these days so virtually no new varieties are being made. I would love to see, for example, some Tazetta Narcissus with the different colors and shapes that I see in the new daffodil hybrids. Furthermore, few bulb



Narcissus hybrid (Avalanche x N. triandrus)

growers are growing and propagating any Tazetta Narcissus, except for the most common ones. We are fortunate on the Monterey Peninsula to have the world's leading authority on Tazetta Narcissus, living right here in Carmel Valley. Bill Welch, or Bill the Bulb Baron as he's often called, was captivated with the Single Chinese Narcissus growing in his back yard as a child, especially when no one knew much about them. He was amazed by their ability to thrive on neglect. The clumps of single and double Chinese we see growing everywhere show us how drought tolerant Tazetta Narcissus are, making them an ideal plant for the Monterey Peninsula.

Today, all of Bill's waking moments are spent working in the field digging, growing, picking and hybridizing Narcissus. He decided to grow Tazetta Narcissus bulbs for a living, so he would be able to work on hybridizing them every chance he got. Since no one else seemed interested in preserving the old varieties that still exist, he has made it his mission in life to collect as many as he can find. At his field in Carmel Valley one can see the largest collection of Tazetta Narcissus in the world. He uses many of these varieties for pollinations to create new types of Narcissus. His goal is to develop varieties with different shaped cups, different colors, double petals, and also varieties that have different fragrances, different seasons of bloom and ones that multiply well in the garden.

Pollinating Narcissus is not as easy as it sounds. The weather conditions have to be just right. Luckily, since these bulbs are native to the Mediterranean area, the weather conditions here on the Monterey Peninsula are close to ideal. You need sunny weather when they are blooming to really get good pollination. They bloom from September into April, so in most places it would be too cold and wet to hybridize. In our area we do get more sunny winter days than most areas, while still getting enough rainfall for the bulbs to grow naturally. Even so, it has been an uphill battle trying to run a one-man bulb business and hybridize at the same time. Some years it's so cold all the flowers freeze, and so do all the seed pods that he worked so hard to pollinate. When the weather is good for pollinating it's bad for cut flowers (because it's too hot) so it seems that there is always a trade off.

Despite all of this, Bill has successfully made thousands of pollinations on his Tazetta Narcissus, collected the seed from them and raised the hybrid bulbs. The bulbs take up to seven years to grow from seed, so as you can imagine, this is a lifetime commitment. Bill has bred and named several new varieties, including Avalanche of Gold, Sugar Cups, New Glory and Liquid Sun. He even plans on naming one of his flowers Jaminia, but we haven't decided which one yet.

If I have piqued your interest in these bulbs, you should make a point to take a trip out to Carmel Valley during the months from January to March if you would like to see the flowers at their fullest bloom. Driving East on Carmel Valley Road the field will

be on your right side across from Country Club Drive. Start looking for a row of pine trees on the right side of the road after you pass Los Laureles Lodge, there will be a sign that says Welch. You can even pick your own flowers, and leave five dollars down at his barn. Bill the Bulb Baron always welcomes visitors who are interested in talking about what he calls his "babies." If you want some of his bulbs they are available from July to December, call him at (831) 236-8397, e-mail him at [billthebulbbaron@aol.com](mailto:billthebulbbaron@aol.com) or just stop by the field.