A Dramatic Spring Show

Daffodils bring cheer to a garden writer's home.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TERESA WOODARD
twenty-six years ago, award-winning garden writer Michael Leach received a bag of 50 daffodil bulbs from a high school friend who wanted to lift his spirits. “When these daffodils bloom, life will be different,” he said to himself as he then mourned the loss of his father and pursued a new direction in his newspaper writing career.

That afternoon, Leach planted the daffodils at the childhood home he and his sister inherited from their father. True enough, his life brightened as the cheery yellow flowers blossomed that spring. He eventually would become a garden writer at the Columbus Dispatch—a position he held for 14 years—and plant more than 1,000 daffodil bulbs over the next two decades that transformed more than an acre of property in Grove City.

Today, he shares the daffodils’ cheer with passersby as clusters of the flowers bloom like curbside bouquets beneath the century-old sugar maple trees in his front yard. More daffodils greet visitors as they unfold in springtime in unison with golden forsythia shrubs along his crushed stone driveway. Others add sunny pops of color to the backyard view from Leach’s sunroom. Ushering in the colorful spectacle are the miniature Tete-a-Tete daffodils that begin blooming in late February near his rear steps.

Leach’s favorite daffodil is Ice Follies for its creamy white flowers and durability in Ohio’s cold winters.

Michael Leach, an award-winning garden writer and daffodil fan, recently chose Sherwin-Williams’ Jonquil color to repaint his home’s exterior.
“Spring is one time you can have color in a shade garden,” says Leach as he extols the virtues of colorful spring bulbs that emerge and bloom before deciduous trees leaf out and bring shade to the garden.

He purchased his first 100 daffodil bulbs from Van Engelen’s catalog. Each fall, he would order and plant anywhere from dozens to 200 bulbs. At $50 per 100 bulbs, he advises that the mixed daffodil bulb collections are an efficient way to fill a landscape. He prefers the narcissus (which is the genus name for “daffodil”) grand mix that includes trumpet, large cup, split cup, small, double and jonquil that bloom at varying times for a show that lasts throughout spring.

“It’s my spring toast to the community,” says Leach, recalling the holiday metaphor of a decorated house as a public greeting card.

According to the American Daffodil Society, there are 25,000 cultivars of daffodils. The spring bulbs are revered not only for their beauty but also their durability. When planted in a sunny location where the soil drains well, most daffodils will come back year after year. Many even multiply as new bulbs sprout from the bottom and sides of the main bulb. Unlike tulips, daffodils are deer resistant because they contain a bitter toxic alkaloid called lycorine.

Ice Follies has become Leach’s favorite daffodil. The creamy white, extra-large flowers surround a ruffled chartreuse cup that turns white as it matures. He says these bulbs grow well in Central Ohio and hold up through ice and snow. They also multiply easily and can be split and replanted throughout the landscape.

During his years as the Dispatch gardening reporter, Leach covered many garden events, ranging from Ameriflora and the Tournament of Roses Parade in 1992 to international garden events such as London’s Chelsea Flower Show. Each time, he borrowed another idea for his own garden, whether it was the tightly planted cottage gardens from England or the Williamsburg integrated plantings of spring bulbs throughout the garden. He also learned gardening tips after interviewing a range of experts. Author Elizabeth Murray, for instance, suggested creating “Monet moments” in the garden by planting flowers together, like yellow daffodils and blue brunnera, with similar bloom times.
TIPS FOR GROWING DAFFODILS

While adaptable to a range of conditions, daffodils won't grow well in some locations. If you have wet soil, don't plan on daffodils. Good drainage is essential. For heavy shade, try early blooming varieties.

Apply bulb fertilizer in early spring as foliage begins to emerge.

Skip the folding, braiding and tormenting of foliage after flowers fade. The more leaf surface exposed to sunlight, the more food the bulb produces to power next year's show. If fading foliage offends, interplant bulbs with perennials that will begin growing later in the spring and hide the yellowing daffodils leaves.