

A Dramatic Spring Show

Daffodils bring cheer to a garden writer's home.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TERESA WOODARD





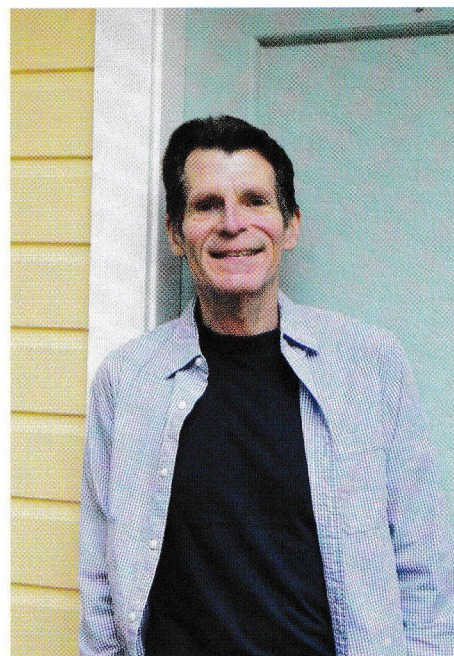
Leach's favorite daffodil is Ice Follies for its creamy white flowers and durability in Ohio's cold winters.

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.



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.

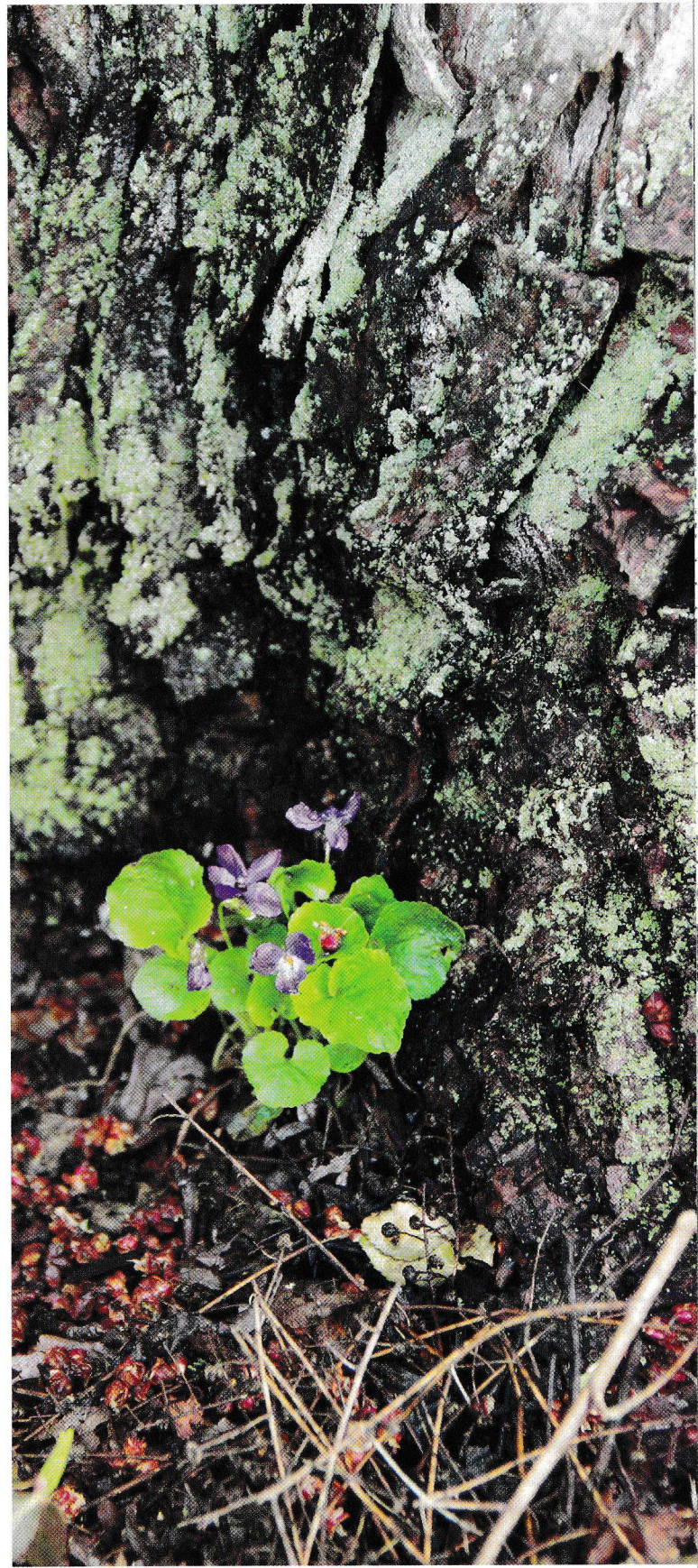
According to the American Daffodil Society, there are 25,000 cultivars of daffodils. The spring bulbs are revered not only for their beauty but also their durability. When planted in a sunny location where the soil drains well, most daffodils will come back year after year. Many even multiply as new 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.



Leach learned to layer a variety of bulbs in different sizes and bloom times for a non-stop color show at his back door. Through the years, he has planted and divided dozens of bulbs so that a burst of color greets those who pass by his home in the spring. Leach advises planting daffodils in areas of the lawn that get a lot of sunlight.



He learned the layering trick from a bulb promoter. Outside his back door, he planted a layer of large bulbs such as daffodils and tulips and then added another layer of medium-sized ones, including hyacinths. Then he topped off the layers with smaller bulbs, including scilla or miniature daffodils.

"The spot color continues for weeks," Leach says.

Recently, he was inspired to repaint his home in the Sherwin-Williams' color Jonquil, named for a type of daffodil that has clusters of flowers. His farmhouse has been through several renovations since it was built in 1890 by his great-grandparents and purchased by his parents in 1952.

Today, Leach continues to write about gardens. He also scouts talent for the garden stage at the *Columbus Dispatch* Home & Garden Show and lectures to garden groups throughout Central Ohio. In closing his talks, he often encourages gardeners to take time to rest in their gardens. At the peak of his gardening days, he found little leisure time, as he spent 200 hours a year on gardening chores. Now, he tries to practice what he preaches as he recites the words he memorized from William Wordsworth's poem, "Daffodils." He shares the poet's affinity for the dancing daffodils' beauty and joy:

*What wealth to me the show had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie in vacant
or in pensive mood, They flash upon that
inward eye Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills, And
dances with the daffodils.* ■

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.



A host of daffodils line the curb of Michael Leach's 125-year-old home in Grove City.