

by JANE BORDEN

photographs by ROBBIE CAPONETTO



# BEST IN SHOW

They weren't all yellow—dispatches from a competitive Southern daffodil exhibition



**The author,** Jane Borden, whose grandmother was a talented daffodil competitor and judge, tries to carry the family torch.

## Daffodils by the Numbers

**7,000,000**

Flower bulbs blooming annually at Keukenhof, an over-70-acre display garden located in Lisse, Netherlands

**1,713**

Stems submitted for judging at the 2017 Garden Club of Virginia Daffodil Show

**35,000**

Number of dollars that the Louise Morris Goodwin Bowl, one of the GCV Daffodil Show trophies, is rumored to be insured for

**25,000**

Minimum number of registered selections (cultivars) of daffodils

**4,000**

Minimum number of daffodils grown by show exhibitor Richard Ezell

**300**

The year, BC, when

The day before the 2017 show, the musty-sweet smell of cut daffodils filled the Hampton Roads Convention Center. The exhibitors hurriedly prepared their gardens' best specimens for judging. Above the din of Virginia accents clanked the sound of a vase hitting the floor. The room gasped—had a prized bloom just been crushed along with its grower's dream of glory? A voice shouted, "Don't worry; it was empty!" The busy crowd then returned to work.

A daffodil-show exhibitor in the 1950s, my grandmother Louisa Harris Tucker regularly brought home blue ribbons. I inherited a silver-platter prize that was once bestowed on her by the Garden Club of Virginia (GCV). Still, I never thought to ask her what in the world a competitive daffodil show was. So, I went to the annual GCV show to find out.

daffodils are thought to have been introduced into gardens for the first time by the Greeks

**250**

Average number of pennies you'll pay for a bulb of a prize-winning daffodil selection

**25**

Percentage of total trophies won by Karen Cogar, who was 1 of 91 exhibitors

**13**

Divisions of daffodil species

**10**

The marriage anniversary marked with daffodils

**5**

Years between planting a hybrid seed and getting a bloom

**4 to 24**

Number of hours the symptoms of daffodil poisoning can last (so don't eat them)

**Unknown**

Years a daffodil bulb can live (definitely longer than you will)

Imagine a test tube standing up inside a little wooden block and containing one cut daffodil stem. Now, picture 1,713 of these, all placed on long black risers in groupings based on (generally) shape, size, and color. At the start of competition, everyone must leave the room, save for judges—six teams of three each—who wander around with clipboards in hand, inspecting every stem by pulling their eyeglasses up or down, depending on the prescription. That's the

**"Once you win a ribbon, you then want the bigger ribbon. Then you want the silver." —LUCY WILSON**

simplest explanation. But, as I learned, the real event happens behind the scenes.

This GCV show, which is affiliated with the American Daffodil Society (ADS), is often the second largest in the nation, next to the ADS national show. The local ADS chapter in Virginia—and, for that matter, in Maryland, Tennessee, Georgia, and so on—also hosts an annual daffodil show. Because the flower's growing season is short, hopeful competitors have been known to attend six shows in a span of three weeks. But no other local garden club or flower society has the history and cachet to pull as many participants as the GCV does. Ergo, no other show gives away as many ribbons. This is good, because that's why gardeners come.

"Once you win a ribbon," explains Lucy Wilson, of Martinsville, Virginia, "you then want the bigger ribbon. Then you want the silver." In addition to individual honors, a particularly excellent stem or grower may receive what is referred to as a special award. In true Virginia fashion, the GCV's Daffodil Show awards are silver: bowls, cups, and trays. Unlike in my grandmother's day, winners now keep the perennial trophies for only a year.



Ribbons are more economical, which is good because daffodil judges award many of them. "The point is to give out ribbons," says Anne Donnell Smith, an ADS horticultural judge from Stevenson, Maryland. "If it's a good class, every entry gets a white ribbon [as honorable mention]." Several of the competitors I interviewed told me they won ribbons at their first show, and then they "got hooked." Daffodil societies need to retain as many participants as possible.

"It's a shrinking world, an old-fashioned thing," notes Mitch Carney, another ADS judge, of Boonsboro, Maryland. "If you ever want to feel young in your mid-fifties, join a plant society." He mentors gardeners in his area, and the ADS sponsors youth-outreach programs as well.

Still, even if ribbons are the hook, it's the community that keeps everyone coming. "People start because they like the flower," Janet Hickman, the GCV's daffodil chairman

says, "but most stay because they like the people." Every year, the gardeners gather excitedly, traveling from cities across the region, to bathe in their shared enthusiasm for these first flowers of spring and in their admiration for each other. As I wandered throughout the room, many of the exhibitors kept grabbing me to introduce me to their friends. "I have been all over the world with fellow daffodil people. We're like a family," says Kate Carney of Boonsboro, Maryland (who's married to Mitch).

Daffodils are so easy to show, in fact, that Hickman gave me a few of hers and even opened up a separate class of daffodils for "Demonstration" only. Racing against the clock on the morning of the GCV's show, Pam Henifin of Hampton, Virginia, helped me prepare three selections—"Limehurst," "Vienna Woods," and "Blushing Lady"—in test tubes. That afternoon, I took home three ribbons: blue, yellow, and red. I'm hooked.

**Above:** All blue-ribbon-winning stems receive a second round of judging by the entire panel.

**Below:** Upwards of 500 ribbons and awards are given out at the show.



# Diagram of a Winner

“It was harder to become a daffodil judge than it was to get my master’s degree,” says Karen Cogar of Alexandria, Virginia, only half joking. The process requires holding a membership with the ADS and passing three schools—each composed of classes, written tests, and an identification test. Then you must student-judge three shows, pass an evaluation by accredited judges, and grow at least 100 different selections of daffodils on your own. You must also exhibit daffodils in ADS-approved shows for at least three years and win at least five blue ribbons. All of these requirements need to be completed within a five-year period. Read on for the winning points.



**SUBSTANCE AND TEXTURE**

A fresh flower has a heavy substance and a smooth texture. Flowers are called “crepey” when they pass their prime and become thin, wrinkled, and translucent. “More often than not,” explains Elise Havens, “the judging comes down to which flower is more alive.”

**PLATONIC IDEAL**

A specimen must be a good representation of its selection in color, size, and form.

**CLEAN EDGES**

The daffodil’s petals and cup are free of any nicks, tears, burns, and misshaped growths. (Burns, when a microarea dries and turns brown, are caused by heat—either from the sun or a too-hot car trunk.)

**POSE**

The bloom faces the viewer at a right angle from the stem.

**PLANE**

The petals appear as if they’re flat against a sheet of paper (exceptions: if the specimen is from a selection with petals that are supposed to flex away from the cup or with petal edges that are meant to curve in or ripple).

**STEM**

A daffodil stem should be straight, neither bowed nor twisted.

“Sometimes you choose a flower, even though it isn’t in perfect form or condition, but because it’s just so beautiful.”

—ELISE HAVENS

# The Key Players

Growers, showers, and judges: all united by serious enthusiasm for these flowers



**Nina Mustard**

THE FIREBRAND

**ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS** Mustard, of Williamsburg, Virginia, did in her role as GCV president was institute change. To save money and engage the public, the GCV will now host the daffodil show in Richmond each year (it has traditionally traveled to different cities in the state). This and other changes to the rose and lily shows “really made waves,” she says. “I’m still recovering from it.”



**Dianne Spence**

THE BEST IN SHOW

Spence, who’s a fourth-generation member of the GCV from Williamsburg, Virginia, took home the top prize for her specimen of ‘Cape Point,’ a gorgeous Division 2 daffodil with a pink cup and white petals. When asked if she wins often, Spence was silent for a moment before saying, with typical Virginia humility, “I’ve had lots of good luck.”

Spence’s winning ‘Cape Point’ stem was hybridized by Brian S. Duncan in Northern Ireland.



**Tory Willis**

THE YOUNGBLOOD

**THE CHAIR OF THE JUDGES** for the Daffodil Show (and a Virginia court judge by trade), Willis describes the GCV as a big family. “We’ve watched each other’s children grow up,” she says. She appreciates the chance to befriend women of all ages. Willis supports Mustard’s decision to host the show in Richmond each year. “This will let us grow in a different way,” she says. “We must find new methods to reach the public.” Meanwhile, Karen Cogar opposes this change. She wants the show to travel because she says it breeds “a sharing of ideas and information. If that’s eliminated, then we won’t be as unified.” Willis agrees but says, “I hope we can find a way to make that happen that isn’t such a financial burden.”





David Vaughan

THE MAN TO BEAT

WHILE I CHATTED with a Norfolk woman, David Vaughan walked by. She leaned toward me and said, "That awful man." Seeing my shock, she clarified: "No, no, honey, I love him. It's just that he always wins." This year, he won two awards and was one of the few men on the makeshift dais.

Coates Clark, Jane Vaughan, & Lucy Wilson

THE LEGACIES

THESE SISTERS—Clark (Stuart, Virginia), Vaughan (Lynchburg, Virginia), and Wilson (Martinsville, Virginia)—are nieces of the late William Pannill, who was a president of the ADS, an honorary member of GCV, and a foremost authority on daffodils. He also hybridized 210 new selections. A special class of competition, and its associated award, is given annually in his name. "We have several of his bulbs," Wilson says. Some of his hybrids are only now coming into bloom. Vaughan's husband, David (pictured above), caught the daffodil bug too. He's become such an expert that the Hillside Garden Club invited him to be an honorary member.



Lina Huesmann

THE MISTRESS OF MINIS

Huesmann prefers to work specifically with miniatures (they are exactly what you think they are), which is how she earned her nickname. "I'm from the Philippines, where we don't have daffodils because they require winterizing. I didn't know anything about the flowers before I came here," she says. And now? "I'm crazy about them," admits Huesmann. To see her mini daffodils better, she is scheduling LASIK eye surgery.

The GCV describes a miniature daffodil as "graceful, with all its parts proportionately small."



Anne Donnell Smith

THE GRANDE DAME

"THAT WOMAN right there is a legend," whispers Claire Mellinger of Earlysville, Virginia, while slyly pointing in the direction of Smith. "She is quite possibly the best judge of all of us," says Richard Ezell of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Smith comes by her status honestly. She is a member of the Maryland Daffodil Society, the oldest one in the country (founded in 1923), and is the daughter of a charter member of the American Daffodil Society (founded in 1954). Still, Smith is down-to-earth. "Daffodil people are not fussy," she says. SL



"She is quite possibly the best judge of all of us."

—RICHARD EZELL  
DESCRIBING ANNE DONNELL SMITH