

# Brian Minter: Time to plan your spring daffodil displays

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**BRIAN MINTER** Updated: September 7, 2018



Award winning 'Golden Echo', is fragrant and long lasting, with a golden yellow cup that melts down into creamy white petals.

*BRENT & BECKY'S BULBS / PNG*

When you think of spring, daffodils with their vibrant yellow, white and bi-colour trumpets have to be one of the images that comes to mind, and in September both local and Dutch-grown daffodils are finding their way into garden stores.

I'm fortunate to have a good friend living in Virginia who is probably one of the foremost authorities on narcissus. In addition to being co-owner with his wife of Brent and Becky's Bulbs and a grower and innovative breeder with a fabulous display garden, Brent Heath has been a Dutch champion when it comes to identifying over 50 different varieties of unnamed narcissus at the conclusion of a flower show in the Netherlands.



Brent Heath gets a closer look at their field of fabulous 'Golden Echo' daffodils. *BRENT & BECKY'S BULBS / PNG*

We asked Heath if daffodils are growing in popularity or declining. "Holding steady, and maybe growing a bit," he said.

In a changing world of smaller living spaces, it was nice to hear that more traditional plants are still relevant in today's gardens. Heath listed off the many reasons why they've hung in there so well.

"For one, they are critter proof. Not only are the leaves and flowers distasteful, they contain alkaloids which make them toxic to animals," he said.

"They are also incredibly versatile. With over 11 different classifications of garden origin and native species, they are a big family with many different forms. They are well suited to container growing, and many have a lovely perfume."

"The other big thing is they will perennialize in our gardens. Of course, some varieties are better at this, but when located and planted appropriately, they will become a perennial. Some folks call this naturalizing, but that term is not correct when referring to narcissus. Plants that naturalize do so by seeding and having their seed spread by various means. Narcissus don't."



Golden fields of daffodils in springtime ... a sight for the eyes and a boost for the soul. *BRENT & BECKY'S BULBS / PNG*

Heath stressed that for narcissus to grow and thrive, they need certain conditions, such as a full sun location. "It's a myth that they will grow in shade. Their leaves are so small that in shady locations that they cannot get enough sunlight to photosynthesize, and they will begin to decline.

"Narcissus also need good drainage because in summer they need to sleep in a dry bed. Heavy wet soils and irrigation systems are the enemy to their survival. If exposed to wet conditions, they will stress and get a bulb-destroying disease called basal rot. It is caused by a soil-borne fungus known as *fusarium oxysporum*."

Heath advises incorporating a good quantity of compost into the soil when planting because it provides important organic matter. In his opinion bone meal is virtually useless; it's all about getting the soil conditions right.

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Heath also says that daffodil flowers should not be cut because that results in a hollow stem, and the blooms will not last long. He recommends we pick daffodils by plucking the stems out of the bulbs, leaving each stem with a solid end. Then the stems should sit for a bit in shallow water before being used in bouquets with any other spring favourites like tulips and iris.



When blooming is finished, the bulbs need eight weeks of downtime for the leaves to build up nutrients for next year's flowers. Heath cautions that only once the leaves begin to turn yellow should they be cut back. In the meantime, do not tie the leaves in knots or bows because that disrupts the process of generating next year's blooms.

Heath says gardening is the slowest of all the performing arts.

"I borrowed this phrase," he said, "but I love quoting it because it is so true."

Heath is a fan of using perennials as companion plants, adding value to narcissus before, during and after they bloom, and camouflage daffodil leaves when they begin their downward cycle.

Some of his favourite companions are hellebores, day lilies, Phlox paniculata, Siberian iris and sun-tolerant hostas. Grasses, too, make magnificent companions.

"I especially like the new carex 'Evercolor' series like 'Evergold', 'Everest', 'Everillo' and 'Eversheen'."



Cheery, golden 'Baby Boomer' offers 5-10 flowers per stem and a whole lot of fragrance.  
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As for the narcissus varieties, there are many great new daffodils that are superior to older varieties. Gardeners still ask for the old yellow trumpet 'King Alfred', which really hasn't been grown in any quantity for many years.

"I realize in B.C. you have a different selection than we do in our region. We have bred many new varieties and sent them to The Netherlands to bulk up the numbers because the Dutch growers are so good at it."

Heath has bred many varieties and is most proud of a series of jonquil hybrids that have lots of small flowers and very narrow leaves. Narcissus Sensation Series — pale yellow 'Moonlight', white 'Starlight' and yellow 'Sunlight' — all have three plus blooms per stem. Narcissus 'Baby Boomer,' a yellow jonquil, has five to 10 blooms per stem.

petals. BRENT &  
BECKY'S BULBS / PNG

Brent and Becky's Bulbs was also allowed to name a most beautiful narcissus with a yellow perianth and orange red cup after a Dutch princess; 'Princess Alexia'. Another is named after Winston Churchill.

Some of the best varieties for today's gardens included one of my favourites 'Rijnveld's Early Sensation', a yellow trumpet which blooms weeks earlier than any other variety. Others include 'Marika,' which has one of the largest yellow trumpets of all the yellows. Of the doubles, Heath likes 'Abba', 'Double Smiles' and 'Tahiti'. For perfume he recommends the jonquil triandrus, tazetta and the Poeticus family. The double white, multiflowered 'Bridal Crown' and compact 'Baby Boomer' are two more favourites.



Another of Brent and Becky's hybrids is 'Heart to Heart', a jonquilla type with small, golden yellow, fragrant flowers, growing to only 6 inches tall.  
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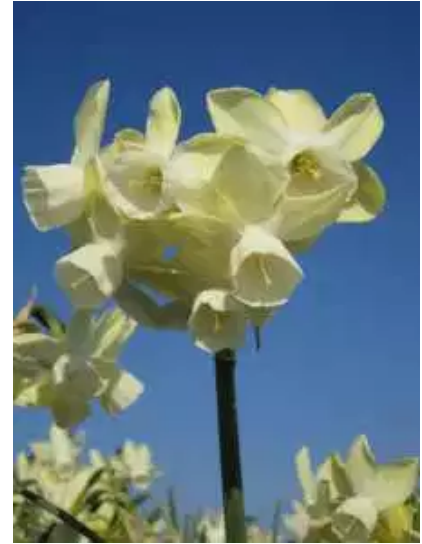
For containers, 'Tete-a-Tete' is the most widely used. Its compact form and number of flowers from such a small bulb is truly amazing. Heath has bred another small container jewel called 'Tete Bouche' which has tiny yellow flowers and a slight perfume.

For a sequential display of flowers when planting bulbs in containers, he recommends layering the bulbs based on their size and bloom times; planting the larger and later blooming varieties deeper. Narcissus bulbs are hardy but when planted in containers in colder regions the pots will need to be protected from severe freezing and thawing.

Growing narcissus bulbs indoors and preventing them from stretching can be tricky.

"We have learned that an air temperature of 60 F (15 C) or just below and a bottom heat temperature of 70 F (21 C) is ideal. If you have a household fan blowing on them, it helps to keep them short."

I have grown to appreciate these great bulbs for their diversity and versatility in so many situations. You may not find some of Heath's favourites in our part of the world but we have many great varieties from which to choose.



'Moonlight Sensation', offers a cluster of fragrant, soft yellow blooms on top of each stem.  
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