Grant Mitsch

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Grant Emerson Mitsch was born on Sunday, May 19, 1907 in the town of Woodbine, Kansas. His father was of German extraction and his mother had an English/Scottish background. In his early youth an interest in ornithology took precedence over horticultural matters.

In 1925 his family moved to Brownsville, Oregon, where he attended the local Presbyterian Church. Here the minister, who was a gladiolus enthusiast, grew many hundreds of flower spikes to decorate his church. At lifting time he approached Grant Mitsch for assistance and paid for the help by offering him corms, which were gratefully accepted. In 1927 the first Grant E. Mitsch catalogue/list offering gladioli for sale was issued.

It seems that 1928 was also the first year that Mitsch grew daffodils, but it was not until he visited the garden of a local prominent horticulturist in 1931 and saw flowers like ‘King Alfred’ that he became smitten by the narcissus. In 1933 he acquired the RHS Daffodil Year Book and the catalogues of Lionel Richardson, Guy Wilson and Barr & Sons. He bought a few bulbs from Guy Wilson, who also wrote to him; the beginning of a regular correspondence between the two. In 1934 he took his first steps in hybridizing daffodils (he was already breeding gladioli) and in 1936 purchased ‘Fortune’, ‘Killingrew’, ‘Beersheba’ and ‘Nevis’ which led to more serious hybridizing. From these very early crosses two seedlings were later to be named: ‘Fairy Dream’ 1W-W (‘Nevis’ × ‘Beersheba’) and ‘Gold Crown 2W-Y (‘Nevis’ × ‘Fortune’).

Over the years during which he was building up his stocks of daffodils he earned his livelihood by growing and selling, at various times, delphiniums, bearded iris, tulips, anemones, primroses and rhododendrons, until by the mid-1950s he dealt exclusively with daffodils.

Around 1934 he learned that ‘Mitylene’ and ‘White Sentinel’ could produce pink offspring. He bought both cultivars and together with ‘Mrs R. O. Backhouse’, which he had purchased earlier, made his first crossings, in a search for better pinks. From ‘White Sentinel’ × ‘Mrs R.O. Backhouse’ he raised ‘Radiation’.

A few years later he received bulbs of some pink cultivars from Australia and on flowering them was struck by the corona colour of ‘Mabel Taylor’. In an attempt to improve the pink colour and form he took pollen from ‘Mabel Taylor’ and put it on to the newly imported ‘Green Island’. From this cross he raised ‘Precedent’ which is today in the ancestry of many of the best highly coloured pink cultivars raised by him. At about the same time as he received the Australian pinks, and
because of the difficulties caused by the war in Europe, Guy Wilson sent him a number of seedlings for trial and possible introduction. Several were later named and catalogued, including 'Shadeen'. When its pollen was put on to 'Tunis', one of the resultant seedlings was introduced as 'Interlude', which was later crossed with 'Interim', to produce the well known 'Accent'. It was while living at Brownsville that he met, courted and in 1937 married Amy Ross.

The first of his own daffodil seedlings was listed in 1945 and in 1946 he and his family moved from Brownsville to Canby. Shortly before the move he made the first of his 'King of the North' × 'Content' crosses, which was a repeat of the Guy Wilson cross which had given him 'Spellbinder'.

The first year Mitsch made this cross was in 1943 and numbered J47. The cross was repeated in 1944 under the number K43. This second attempt provided 'Entrancement', 'Honeybird' and 'Luna Moth'. The cross was again repeated in 1946 as AM20 this time being responsible for 'Lunar Sea'. In 1949 cross number P5 was recorded as being 'Binkie' × K43, the pollen parent on this occasion being a number of different seedlings, flowering for the first time, from the 1944 cross. Seedling P5 gave him 'Bethany', 'Daydream', 'Limeade', 'Nazareth' and many other selected clones that were named and introduced.

After raising 'Daydream' and its siblings he recognized that on this side of the Atlantic hybridizing was almost exclusively confined to the first three divisions. He decided to devote more of his energies towards working with divisions 5 to 9. A breakthrough came with jonquils when he was cultivating some jonquil seedlings, and noticed that one open pollinated pod looked rather fat. The pod contained more than 50 seeds. Both the original bulb and those resulting from its seed proved fertile when crossed with the modern hybrids. That original bulb was grown on and later introduced as 'Quick Step'.

His work, outside the first four divisions, has given us, amongst others: 'Akepa' (5W-P), 'Carib' (6W-P), 'Inca' (6Y-W), 'Jetfire' (6Y-R), 'Oryx' (7Y-W), 'Pink Angel' (7W-GWP), 'Stratosphere' (7Y-Y), 'Radiant Gem' (8Y-R) and 'Phantom' (11W-P). All these in addition to the well known and established division 1-3 cultivars 'Chiloquin' (1Y-W), 'Memento' (1Y-P), 'Accent' (2W-P), 'Festivity' (2W-Y), 'Daydream' (2Y-W), 'Aircastle' (3W-Y), 'Audubon' (3W-WWP), and 'Cool Crystal' (3W-W), and the list has not yet finished.

Each year his hybridizing consisted, on average, of 100 different crosses. Each cross providing 1 to 6,000 seeds, with some crosses being repeated in subsequent years (it has been recorded by one visitor that at one time Mitsch was growing 25,000 seedlings from 'Green Island' / 'Accent' crosses). It was his usual practice not to introduce a new culi-
var into his catalogue until he had 50 bulbs. When the full range of his full work is considered Grant Mitsch was arguably the greatest daffodil raiser to date. He died after a lengthy illness on March 12, 1989, leaving the world enriched by his work on behalf of, and his love for, the daffodil.

**Book reviews**

*Modern Miniature Daffodils Species and Hybrids* by James S. Wells Published by Batsford. £25.

'No one but no one, seems to have a genuinely true to name stock.' So writes James Wells writing of Alec Gray's 'Solitar' in his long awaited book *Modern Miniature Daffodils, Species and Hybrids*. He goes on to say, 'perhaps it is inherent in growing and handling these small bulbs.' But be warned that if you start collecting you have to have tenacity beyond the norm to obtain what you want. This book is a delight to read and a mine of information. It gives me an injection of hope that my tenacity badly needs at the moment as the author has acquired far more of these elusive treasures than have I over the last 25 years.

James' devotion and dedication to the plants comes across on every page, each plant is obviously one of the family. It is the chapters on cultivation that leave one spellbound. It is a difficult task to write 'how to grow' or 'how I grow' but here it comes over beautifully — the photograph of the narcissus house complete with red carpet — and his references to cleanliness to the point of being 'kitchen clean' are very explicit. I fear the reverse would be more applicable in my domain.

The author patiently takes us through the definitions of a miniature and the various classifications and gracefully skims the thin ice between the revised sections in *Flora Europaea* and *Fernandes*. The book is well illustrated with colour photographs and Mike Salmon's paintings and line drawings are accurate and exquisite. However, the author wished me to point out that the photograph on page 141 is of 'Bobbysoxer' and that on page 142 of 'Bebop'. To criticise the book would be sheer 'nit picking'. I am sure that there are those who would wish to argue one or two finer points, but that is the real test for an original non-plagiarized book.

I thoroughly recommend this new addition to our libraries. It is a must for the 'miniature maniacs' and the 'big boys' should read it and also learn a great deal. For those not addicted to daffodils, beware, your addiction is about to start as you begin to read and come under the spell of a dedicated miniature daffodil grower.

John W. Blanchard