

Peter Barr Memorial Cup – B. S. Duncan

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At the RHS Daffodil Show in London in 1934, Guy Wilson won the Engleheart Cup while Lionel Richardson gained the medal for Best Bloom with 'Trevisky'. At Lennymore in Co. Antrim, that same spring, Brian S. Duncan was born, the seventh in a family of eight children. His family were of the land, being dairy farmers. After schooling and a university education his first job was with the Ministry of Agriculture at Cullybackey as a dairy adviser. Though he has now moved to other full-time employment, in the milk product business, he spends a vast amount of time and effort running what is certainly the largest specialist daffodil business catering for the amateur growers in the British Isles, if not the world.

His involvement with daffodils began in 1960, although his prime interest in flowers at that time was the rose, when he bought some bulbs 'to fill in'. A couple of years later, he placed an order with Guy L. Wilson Ltd for a dozen bulbs priced at £1.50. Included in the twelve received were 'Kingscourt', 'Cantatrice' and 'Galway'. The following year he plunged into the world of exhibiting by staging some blooms at the Omagh Horticultural Society Daffodil Show; amongst his flowers was 'Cantatrice' which was selected as Best Bloom in Show. In the same year he met the man who was to be his inspiration and mentor,

Tom Bloomer. Also that spring one daffodil cross was made, and though seed set, no seedling survived to reach flowering stage.

The hallowed halls at Vincent Square first saw Brian in 1964 when he turned up with an adapted shoe box containing one bloom each of 'Ceylon' and 'Trousseau'. That same year the hybridizing urge took a firm hold. From 23 different crosses 325 seeds were sown, of which 164 grew to be planted out as seedlings. From that relatively small number, five were eventually to be named including 'Ulster Bank' and 'Premiere'. In 1965, 20 crosses produced 493 seeds, 10 of which went on to be named, with 'Violetta' and 'Doctor Hugh' becoming the best known. 'Lilac Charm' was from the following year's crossings, while the 1967 crosses produced, amongst others, 'Fragrant Rose'.

In 1971, Tom Bloomer issued the first catalogue in the name of Rathowen Daffodils and no one at the time could anticipate what effect that development would have on Brian Duncan. By 1973 the work involved in running a specialized bulb firm had become too much for its founder and it was to Brian he turned when looking for someone to take over the business. Together with Clarke Campbell, another amateur grower and a farmer by trade (which allowed him to contribute an essential ingredient to any horticultural business – land), the new owners issued their first catalogue in 1974. That same year Rathowen's trade stand at the RHS show gained its first gold medal. The Williams Memorial Medal awarded each year for 'a group of plants and/or cut blooms of one genus which show excellence in cultivation staged at one of the Society's shows' was won in 1978 and 1982, a tribute to Brian's skill as a grower and expertise as an exhibitor.

He has staged 12 of his own seedlings in the Engleheart Cup class for several years, gaining his first triumph in 1985 and repeating that win the following year. The American Daffodil Society awarded him their Gold Medal in 1986 for 'creative work of a pre-eminent nature in the understanding and advancement of Daffodils'.

This year the RHS has awarded the Peter Barr Memorial Cup to Brian in recognition of the work he has enthusiastically undertaken in all areas of the development and promotion of the daffodil and for the excellent results his endeavours have produced.

He is today the same level-headed man who appeared on the daffodil scene over twenty years ago. He still seeks perfection and remains a seeker of experience and wisdom. He has achieved much, but for him, and us, the best of his efforts are yet to come.