

Daffodil Queen

Arkansas woman's hobby flowers into festival

By Marti Attoun, contributing editor • PHOTOS BY GREG OWENS

WADING KNEE-DEEP in daffodils on her farm in Camden, Ark. (pop. 13,154), Roxane Daniel greets different varieties of the springtime flower by name as if they're dear friends.

"That's Professor Einstein," says Daniel, 72, as she reaches down to pick an orange-cupped daffodil. "There's Golden Dawn and Early Cheer, and over there is Fortune, one of my favorites because it's so hardy."

Each spring, Daniel's forests and fields are ablaze with 3 million daffodils, including more than a thousand varieties and hybrids that bloom in buttery yellow bursts and white and peach-colored swaths across 17 acres.

"I'm a painter and live on a hill and always thought how wonderful it would be to look out and see a Renoir and a mass of color," says Daniel, who began planting daffodils on her farm during the 1960s. "I grew up with daffodils and all kinds of flowers. Planting flowers is the Southern thing to do."

For Daniel, so is sharing her flowers. She always has welcomed picnickers and sightseers, as well as brides and high school seniors who pose against the dazzling floral canvas for their formal portraits.

Nineteen years ago, when money was needed to restore the 1913 Missouri Pacific Railroad depot in Camden, Daniel proposed an idea that has blossomed into the Camden Daffodil Festival, which attracts several thousand visitors each March and benefits the town year-round.

"The depot was in ruins, and Dennis and I had given all the money we could afford to give," says Daniel, referring to her late husband. "It was March, and our daffodils were in bloom. My friend and

I were standing in my front yard and I said, 'Do you think, if this was for charity, that people would pay to drive through and see these flowers?'"

Daniel painted a poster, which volunteers circulated at local churches and businesses, inviting flower lovers to her farm. "Doggone, we raised \$1,200 at \$5 a carload," Daniel adds.

Each spring, attendance at the festival multiplies, along with the daffodils and attractions. Visitors board buses and wagons to tour several flower gardens and historic homes. Other festival attractions include an art show, quilt show, steak cook-off, Civil War re-enactment encampment, arts & crafts, and storytelling at the 1830 Oakland Confederate Cemetery where many town pioneers are buried.

"Because of Roxane's idea and her interest in her community, the festival benefits so many," says festival treasurer Sammie Briery, 68, who has 1,400 daffodils in her own front yard. "The whole town has been caught up in the fun and excitement of having so many visitors."

Profits from the Daffodil Festival fund upkeep of the pioneer cemetery, projects of the Ouachita County Historical Society, and downtown murals, benches and flower boxes blooming with daffodils.

Daffodils long have comforted Daniel. In 1980, when her son, Dennis Jr., served with the U.S. Navy aboard the aircraft carrier USS *John F. Kennedy*, she found solace in planting a daffodil for each of the ship's 5,500 sailors.

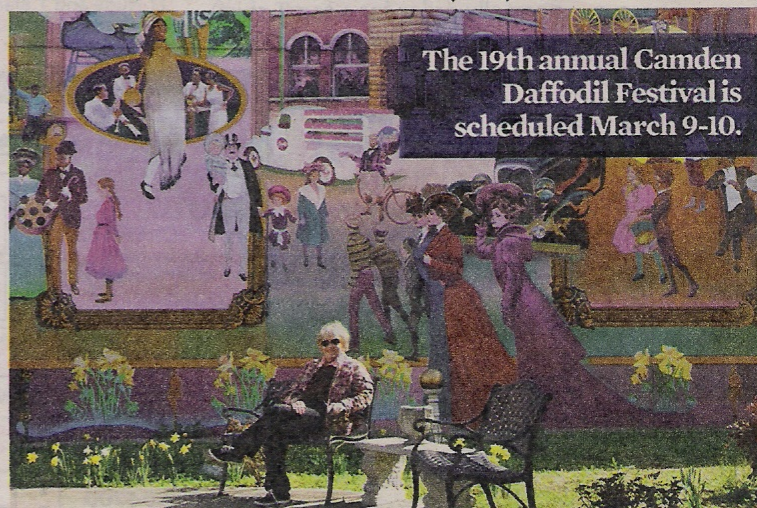
"As I planted each bulb, I'd say a prayer," Daniel recalls.

When she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1986, her surgeon advised Daniel

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Roxane Daniel's springtime bouquet blossomed into a community festival, which funds benches, flower boxes and historical murals (below) in downtown Camden, Ark.



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Daniel strolls in a field ablaze with daffodils.

“to go home, get a hobby and dig deep into it.” Daniel kept her spade busier than ever, planting a thousand daffodil bulbs that her mother gave her each year for her birthday, rescuing doomed daffodils that Dennis, a real estate developer, found on land being cleared, and putting in the ground varieties bought from nurseries. The result is a floral parade at her farm from February through May—since different varieties bloom at different times—and a brilliant bouquet the second weekend in March to proclaim spring in her community. ★