

# THE EDWIN C. POWELL STORY

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This seems an opportune time to review the contribution made by Edwin C. Powell to the progress of daffodil interest and development in the United States. As the closing out of daffodil stocks at his Hermitage Gardens near Rockville, Md., occurred 16 years ago, and Mr. Powell himself died four year later, it may appear this review is somewhat belated, since the American Daffodil Society completed its first decade in the interim.

Judging his contribution consists basically in determining how Mr. Powell's daffodil introductions of nearly 30 years ago now rate with the present fine flowers from Europe and from America's upgrowing competition. Our attempt to pass judgment at this time may be premature, since the judgments of today often falter in the course of future progress. Real significance at any time should be estimated in relation to the environment in which each progressive step occurred, and temporary judgments are subject to periodic review. In daffodil history, however, such judgments have sometimes held sway for many years. The variety King Alfred, introduced 75 years ago, remains the principal commercial daffodil for flower production in our Pacific Northwest, which is sometimes regarded as the nearest approach to a daffodil paradise in this country. Fortune (1923), for which the initial sale price was \$250 a bulb in England, has now fallen to 20 cents each. Nevertheless, it retains, together with its descendants that contain some of its distinguished characteristics, important recognition in the breeding of newer daffodils.

Edwin Powell's interest in American daffodil culture and development began in 1922, when this always welcomed harbinger of spring was receiving public recognition in America chiefly as greenhouse-grown cut flowers or as massive plantings in gardens of the affluent, and practically all from imported bulbs. Daffodils had attracted limited culture in home plantings since Colonial time, but had seldom enrolled any confirmed hobbyists in growing or breeding for future expansion. It was then, however, when serving as senior editor in the Division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, that Mr. Powell began a life-long friendship with David Griffiths, then in charge of the Department's first recognition of ornamental bulb culture as a phase of general agriculture. By 1925, and with Dr. Griffiths' encouragement, he had found a special interest in the breeding of new varieties better adapted to daffodil culture in this country, especially for home garden needs. This was entirely a matter of personal interest, not an official duty, and it soon became a full-fledged hobby. During the ensuing years at a

suburban home in Silver Spring, Md., he brought forth his first variety to receive a distinctive name, a large yellow trumpet quite appropriately introduced as David Griffiths. In 1935, at one of the then relatively new flower shows (in the East) devoted to or emphasizing daffodils, this seedling received an award as "best in show" at the Takoma Horticultural Club in Washington, D. C. That was also the year of the first *American Daffodil Year Book*, sponsored by the American Horticultural Society and edited by B. Y. Morrison, another recognized pioneer in this subject in the eastern U. S. It contained an article by Mr. Powell under the title "Breeding Daffodils for American Needs."

By then the daffodil hobby of the Powells—Mrs. Powell (Grace) must be included with E. C. as a constant co-worker in this enterprise—had outgrown the area of a suburban lot, so this production team and all their daffodil stocks found a better home near Rockville, Md. There the Hermitage Gardens grew up on four acres of open ground, including a stream. Daffodil beds continued to expand, first in a plot containing 141 named varieties, each in a separate group, and finally as a bulb nursery with 65,000 seedlings. Various other flowering bulbs were added in the background to emphasize the natural companions of daffodils as spring beauties. Selections from the promising seedlings were exhibited annually for 15 years in flower shows from Baltimore to Lynchburg, Va., being always a prominent feature in shows of the Takoma Horticultural Club and the Garden Club of Virginia. Numerous awards as "best in show" followed, which doubtless aided in the final choice of those meriting formal introduction. In view of all the exhibits displayed at the Takoma Horticultural Club shows it is appropriate that detailed notes from Mr. Powell have been preserved in the archives of this club. They show the parentage of seedlings already formally introduced, others under consideration for this distinction, and special ratings and comments received in the various shows.

There were other daffodil interests in the Powell repertoire besides exhibiting new seedlings. He also presented show-quality specimens of the familiar varieties of that period, always for educational purposes, and apparently never in competition with other exhibitors. Mr. Powell was a much sought-for show judge and garden club lecturer in matters relating to daffodils and other spring bulbs, and always generously contributed these favors. Besides the article on breeding daffodils previously mentioned, his literary contributions included the following: "Daffodil David Griffiths" and "Breeding and Raising the Small Daffodils" in the *American Daffodil Year Books*, 1936 and 1937; also "Eighteen Years' Experience in Breeding Narcissus" in *Herbertia*, 1943, p. 95-101, and "Production of New Narcissus" *ibid* 1946, p. 123-128.

Each of these articles carried illustrations of Powell introductions. With the aid of Walter Gannaway—another daffodil enthusiast in the early history of the flower in this area and also a skilled photographer—Mr. Powell began assembling a collection of color slides to illustrate favored daffodil varieties, including those used in his breeding work and the resulting seedlings. This set of slides had reached a total of about 250 when the Hermitage Gardens period ended.

Between 1943 and 1949 about 64 of the Powell seedlings were selected for formal introduction and were included in the *RHS Classified List of Daffodils* from 1950 to 1961. Most of the names he chose for registration were those of American Indian tribes, individuals, and localities, used to emphasize their American source. Our ADS chronicler (and electronic computer) of daffodil ancestry, Dr. Tom Throckmorton, has already covered 44 of the Powell introductions by this modern technique of systematic recording, and will probably include the remaining 20 as they are brought to his attention. Therefore it seems unnecessary to list all the names and the parentages here. At present only a few of them still appear in bulb catalogs, and one cannot foretell how long they may remain among those sought by collectors and breeders. Some remain in gardens of those who knew the Powells intimately or especially admired the named varieties, and certain unnamed seedlings are still grown for reasons of sentiment. At present Cheyenne (7b) appears to be the only Powell introduction listed in catalogs of both The Daffodil Mart and Grant Mitsch,



—Photo by Walter H. Gannaway

One of Edwin C. Powell's Creations—Chicopee (6a)

though the latter also lists Kasota and Kiowa, both 7b, and Oconee (5b). Roberta Watrous writes that Kasota was so much esteemed that it was for years "the only thing I could give to people who 'had everything.'" Hiawassee (8) gained at least local notoriety as the progeny of a cross Casandra X Paperwhite, technically (*Narcissus exertus* x *N. poetarum*) X *N. tazetta* subsp. *papyraceus*.

This was noteworthy because it was regarded as a "hardy polyanthus"—a cross between a hardy poeticus variety and a tender, early-blooming, all-white *tazetta*, involving chromosome numbers of 14 and 22 in the parents. It also differed from the *poeticus* crosses with other *tazettas* having yellow cups (bicolors) producing varieties of medium hardiness such as Elvira. The story was told in print that a noted daffodil judge, first seeing Hiawassee in a show, wanted to place an order with Mr. Powell for 100 or more of the bulbs, to which E. C. replied, "Heavens, man, there are only five in existence." At any rate, Hiawassee increased to a larger population and more admirers and it was finally selected as "the best miniature" in the Washington Daffodil Society show in 1964, though opinions still differ as to whether it is properly classified as a true miniature.

Charles Culpepper, another veteran of daffodil history in the National Capital area, and a bulb grower and breeder who needs no introduction elsewhere, writes of his association with E. C. Powell: "All the enjoyment that I have experienced from my hybridizing work with daffodils I owe to Mr. Powell for suggestions, encouragement and help in those years." Mr. Culpepper's acquaintance persists in other than recollection. He writes that he still has a large yellow trumpet, a gift from Mr. Powell, which he has used in producing most of the big yellow seedling trumpets he grows for florists and others.

After retirement from the Department of Agriculture in 1940 Mr. Powell began giving more attention at Hermitage Gardens to collecting and breeding daffodils for open ground naturalizing and for rock gardens. This brought him into correspondence with the Missouri Botanical Garden and Dr. Edgar Anderson, geneticist to the Garden, who wrote that they were seeking daffodils "that would succeed in worn-out pastures, be stiff enough for spring breezes, and be able to withstand late freezes."

It was found that the Powell variety Chicopee (6a) "withstood these trying conditions, bloomed earlier than February Gold, and made a brave display every spring." This led to a further exchange of experience and material directed toward this objective, and finally to the donation to the Botanical Garden of all the bulbs not yet of blooming size derived from the Powell crosses intended to produce likely varieties for rock gardens. Dr. Anderson writes that this material was planted at the

Garden's Gray Summit arboretum, and remained there until recent years. He states that they were mostly true miniatures, golden-yellow or primrose-yellow predominating, and that some of the clones multiplied rapidly. "The best of them are similar to the English varieties . . . and have great hardihood as well as beauty of form and delicacy of appearance." Changes in Garden administration and staff made it difficult to care for them as they deserved, but "volunteer help from the Daffodil Society rescued them," though many were lost, including some of the best selections. Dr. Anderson adds that "it seems increasingly likely that an effective way of getting the best of these survivors into proper hands for multiplication and dispersal may at last be found."

It remains only to mention the judgment of another contemporary of Edwin C. Powell in those early years in the progress of daffodil culture in American gardens. B. Y. Morrison, esteemed as the dean of American authorities in this field, regards as Mr. Powell's most important accomplishment his hybrids with or in the *jonquilla* and *triandrus* sections; "they occupied a field that was not then preempted by anyone." He adds that he has tested all the Powell introductions in these groups that were available, and that in his present location at Pass Christian, Miss., they have lived well, but are not outstanding as compared to later introductions of others.

In this conclusion to the Powell story one can only say in solemn accord with Zarathustra (of Nietzsche)—"What is great in man is that he is a bridge, not a goal."