

THE MODERN DAFFODIL

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TO compare the modern daffodil which you see exhibited in this hall to-day with the exhibition varieties of fifty years ago shows the enormous advance made in the breeding of this flower in this short period. For fifty years barely represents ten generations of daffodils, as five years is needed to obtain a flower from seed.

In a book on modern daffodils written in 1910 by the REV. JOSEPH JACOB, the recommended list of the twelve best exhibition varieties contains only two names that would be generally known to-day. They are 'White Star' and 'King Alfred'. To buy a bulb of each of the twelve kinds would then have cost over £200. The author goes on to say that the ridiculous prices then being paid of £30, £40 and £50 per bulb cannot possibly continue, nor does he consider much further advance in their development is either possible or wanted. This goes to show how dangerous it is to predict the future in these matters.

In spite of this warning, I do feel that there is still an enormous field left for further development, and that it will continue, but perhaps at a somewhat slower pace than of late, colours and their range will be improved, if that is the right word. New forms will be produced that will certainly depart from the present traditional shape.

There is plenty of room for improvement in form and, most important of all, in the ability of a variety to produce a large proportion of good quality flowers. There are to-day far too many show varieties that produce only the odd flower of good quality; maybe they produce more in some gardens than others, but there is still a big field here for improvement.

Because of this variable nature, I shall refer only to those varieties which I have grown at my home at Dunley near Stourport, Worcestershire for a sufficient number of years to ensure they have really settled down. New bulbs brought in from outside usually take up to three years to do this.

The soil in which the daffodils are grown has the appearance of good light sandy red loam. But the Horticultural Advisory Service's report on it is not so complimentary. The soil, it stated, was a sandy silt with a fair to very poor structure with the pH varying from 6.5 to 8.4, the highest alkalinity being at a depth of 18 inches. Whilst I have no scientific data to prove the fact, my observations indicate the best growth and flowers come from these areas where the pH does not rise much above 7.

For exhibition, the daffodils are grown in beds which are 6 feet wide

and any convenient length, and are made up during the winter by double digging and heaping up soil from the pathways between beds. By this means the top of the bed is some 10 inches above the paths. The raised bed is, I am sure, very valuable, as it gives quick drainage away from the bulb and helps the ripening of the bulbs, especially in wet summers. The planting of bulbs in rows across the bed is completed by the end of August, all bulbs having been treated previously by dipping in a cold solution of Aretan and Aldrex for twenty minutes directly after lifting. Normally the bulbs are left down for two years.

In order to try and ascertain the optimum depth for planting the bulbs, depth of planting was varied along the row, one end of each row being about 4 inches to the base of the bulb, the other nearly 10 inches for the average size of bulb. The obvious result of this experiment was the difference in time of flowering, which was very marked, especially for the first year down. The shallow bulbs flowered some seven to eight days earlier than those planted at maximum depth. The variation was less marked the second year down. On lifting, it was found that the shallow bulbs had pulled themselves down to about 5-6 inches. Although this method of planting was carried out for a number of years over a wide variety of bulbs, no obvious difference could be seen in either the quality or size of the flowers, except in very few cases. But there was some reduction in the rate of bulb increase at maximum depth.

I do not think these results would necessarily apply in other soils, especially heavy clays. I now plant the bulbs at about 5-6 inches, as this seems to be the depth they want, although in this light soil it is clearly not very critical.

After planting, the beds are mulched annually either with mushroom compost or manure from deep litter chicken houses, but it must be old and weathered. The fresh manure when received is stacked in the open and left for at least two to three years before using. Besides keeping down the weeds, the mulch prevents the flowers from becoming splashed with mud during heavy rains, it also provides sufficient feed for the bulbs. If additions of bonemeal are given as well there are, with some varieties, signs of over feeding.

During the flowering period the beds are protected from wind by surrounding them with coire netting about 7 feet high, special show flowers, after being clipped to a short bamboo, being covered with a bloom protector. This is especially necessary with those red cup varieties that are easily burnt by the sun. Another method used for protecting a row of flowers is to use a Dutch barn type of cover which extends across the full width of the bed and covers one row of flowers. This type of protector is easily made up from thin aluminium sheet formed into an inverted Vee, wide enough to cover conveniently one row and held by four corner supports which are pushed into the soil between the rows. As polished aluminium is a very good reflector of heat, the flowers underneath on a sunny day are kept at a much lower temperature

than those under the more conventional protectors, which is useful in hot weather.

As the rainfall at Dunley only averages 23 inches per annum, it is necessary in the spring to water the beds during dry spells, and the equivalent of about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of rain is given at each watering. No other special cultural methods are used.

Turning now to the various varieties that are grown for exhibition and breeding purposes, time will permit only a brief reference to some that have been thoroughly proved and found reliable in the garden over a number of years. I have also tried to include only those varieties which promise to be good garden plants for the future. I am afraid there are many fine show flowers which will never qualify on this score, and are therefore excluded.

Starting with division 1a, the yellow trumpets, there is no doubt in my mind that 'Kingscourt' is easily the best and most reliable flower of its class, although it is now many years since it was first introduced, it is more than able to hold its own against any of its newer and more expensive rivals. Some of the new varieties such as 'King's Ransom' and 'Golden Rapture' may supersede 'Kingscourt', but do not as yet give the consistent quality that would be required. 'Kingscourt' has a splendid constitution with a fine hard bulb which produces a profusion of show quality flowers and is undoubtedly one of the best show flowers available, as well as a first-rate garden plant. In addition, I have found it an excellent parent to breed from. Curiously enough, it is one of the few varieties that I grow that seems to prefer rather shallow planting. 'Spanish Gold' is rather similar in form to 'Kingscourt', from which it was bred, but not so large, nor is it quite so robust. But in colour it is better than 'Kingscourt', being rich 'Maximus' gold throughout.

The bicolours I find difficult and have tried most of them without any conspicuous success. Nothing that I do has any effect. Perhaps 'Preamble' is a little more co-operative than the others in this division, and it has the added advantage of good colour comparison; a perfectly pure white perianth and a lovely rich yellow trumpet, and when grown well, as it does in some gardens, it is an excellent show flower. But whatever I do it only produces a miserably small bulb at Dunley. However, growing it on clay in the south-west of Scotland, it is proving to be a much better plant. 'Trousseau', whilst being a good garden plant and early, needs time to develop the pinky buff flush on the trumpet, but by then the perianth has started to twist and curl, which spoils the effect.

The white trumpets, unlike the bicolours, seem to enjoy the conditions and grow strongly, especially is this so with the 'Empress of Ireland' (Fig. 110). It increases rapidly and gives a large proportion of show quality flowers. It has only one fault, a tendency for the perianth segments to be split. Growing it in rather poorer ground may help to overcome this trouble.

'Cantatrice', a much older flower, is still able to hold its own on the show bench, but with me the number of really good show flowers it can

produce is small, and some seasons it has a tendency for the perianth to become too pointed and starry, this again is another variety which does better on the clay in Scotland. 'Vigil', one of the whitest flowers (it makes most of the whites look grey), seems to develop best in a wet spring. With me it is rather variable. 'Rashee', a relatively small flower, coming as it does rather late in the season, is not as well known as it should be. Or perhaps, judged alongside the giants like 'White Prospect', the 'Empress of Ireland' and others, it is overlooked. This is a most lovely flower, pure ice-white with a touch of moss green at the base of the trumpet; it is also a good grower.

In division 2, the choice is almost too large, but of the red and yellow 'Ceylon' is outstanding for its deep rich colouring, its earliness, and consistent quality. It increases rapidly. It is sunproof, and in fact unless grown in the open will not develop its full colours. It is also a first-class garden plant. 'Border Chief' is another giving very consistent quality, being a strong grower, free of increase and with large, elegant flowers. 'Revelry' can always be relied on to produce lovely smooth flowers, increases rapidly, but lacks perhaps the intensely coloured perianth which is now in favour. As a garden plant it grows too tall and is easily damaged by wind or rain, together with 'Air Marshal' it is useful for the breeding of smooth perianths.

'Galway' (a self yellow) makes a splendid garden plant, strong, free of increase, the flowers are of good form, of near trumpet dimensions and are of an intense gold throughout and is quite one of the best.

'Tudor Minstrel', a division 2b flower without red in the cup, is undoubtedly the best in its class, a very large smooth flower with a stem and constitution to match its size (Fig. 111). The large bulb increases rapidly and seems to like plenty of water, but it is easy to over-feed the plant and get creased flowers. Unfortunately, it has a habit of hanging its head too much.

'Green Island' is another first rate plant both for show and garden decoration. For show purposes it is sometimes difficult to get the perianth really smooth. But there can be few varieties that increase as fast. 'Green Island' has also been used most successfully for breeding.

Although 'Arbar' is still the most reliable show flower in the section for red and whites, it is not an easy plant to grow well and it has a nasty habit of developing yellow spots on the crown, a probable sign of over-feeding. There are a large number of newer varieties coming on in this division, among them 'Avenger' and 'Northern Light' are settling down well and show great promise. Of the older varieties, 'Kilworth' with its bright red cup is outstanding both on the show bench or as a garden flower, also it is with 'Arbar' the most successful parent in the division. Nearly all to-day's newest and best exhibition varieties in this division have been bred from 'Kilworth' and 'Arbar'. 'Fermoy', similar in character to 'Kilworth' but a much larger flower with an orange cup and a large flat perianth, whilst not being quite up to single bloom standard, is an excellent show and garden plant.

I have deliberately excluded the pinks from this lecture, as few of the older varieties really qualify under the heading of good garden plants, and those that grow well are not really pink. Of the new varieties that are really pink, some may well prove to be good growers, but as yet they seem to be very much the specialist's flower.

To my mind, some of the loveliest flowers come from division 2c, especially those showing green lights at the base of the perianth, which contrasts and emphasises the white of the perianth and trumpet. 'Early Mist', a flower of near trumpet proportions, which flowers before most others in this class and was the pollen parent of 'Canisp', is a first rate flower. 'Ave', the other parent of 'Canisp', can come with a lovely smooth roll to the trumpet. But with me, it has never produced the slightest roll, invariably it ends quite sharply as if cut off with a knife. Having a tall and rather weak stem, it is easily damaged by the weather and for this reason I have doubts as to its future as a garden plant.

'Easter Moon' seldom comes up to expectations but as a parent seems to impart great substance and breadth to the perianth of its offspring, an unexpected result, as the difficulty with 'Easter Moon' is to get a reasonably broad perianth to the flowers. To my mind, 'Castle of Mey' is one of the best in this group, a medium sized flower of beautiful proportions, ice-white throughout with green at the base of its perfectly balanced trumpet. It grows and multiplies well and has a good strong stem without being too stiff. It has every prospect of becoming a first rate garden plant.

Turning to division 3 flowers, for exhibition purposes it is to me a relief to have at last 'Doubtful' as an alternative to 'Chungking' for the red and yellows. As its name implies, it is only just in division 3a, but never having grown 'Chungking' really successfully, it is all the more satisfactory to find 'Doubtful' such an easy and accommodating flower to grow and exhibit.

The red and whites in this division are represented by a number of new and very promising flowers, amongst them 'Rockall' is very good, being consistent in quality and free of increase. But even so, the old well-tried favourite, 'Matapan', when it throws a really good flower (which it does not do very often), is still unbeatable. It has the added advantage of being early. 'Mahmoud' is, of course, a much easier flower to grow but it has not got the quality or whiteness of 'Matapan'. Few, if any of the red and whites in the division, are much good for garden decoration as they burn far too easily, but they are very useful as cut flowers for the house. Whilst being very dissimilar, I have found both 'Corofin' and 'Blarney' are first rate plants for this purpose.

I must confess to a general dislike of double daffodils, and particularly those with the very large mop heads which the stem can no longer support when the flower gets wet with rain, but one or two of the newer varieties are such an enormous improvement on the old ones that I have to admit to their charms, and in 'Acropolis' you have a very fine flower indeed.

Besides these varieties that are mostly seen on the show bench, there is a large selection of rather older varieties that make splendid garden plants, growing either in borders or even planted out in grass as stocks build up. Most of the show varieties I have mentioned will make first class garden plants and can be safely planted in shrub or mixed borders. Bearing in mind that the red cups are mostly burnt by the sun, it is advisable to choose for this purpose those that are sunproof, such as 'Rustom Pasha' or 'Ceylon', two of the few really sunproof red and yellows. They will only need lifting every three years, or even every four years, when grown in this way.

A good way to select bulbs for this purpose is to visit the Society's Daffodil trials at Wisley, far better than selecting from a catalogue, or even the show bench, as the actual form and growth can be seen when growing under normal conditions. It is worth remembering that the soil at Wisley is by no means ideally suited to daffodils.

As the bulbs multiply, they can be planted out in grass and here they increase more slowly. Provided they are well spaced out when planted, I have not found it necessary to move them even after eight to ten years. The red cups somehow look out of place in this setting and the best effect certainly comes from the yellows and whites, and especially effective are plantings of the sulphury yellows.

The problem, of course, with growing daffodils in grass is to know what to do with the rather unsightly grass and foliage which must be left until after the leaves begin to die down which is usually in the last half of June. To cut the leaves before will certainly be harmful to the bulbs and will reduce or even prevent flowering the following year.

Of those that I have tried and found do especially well in grass are 'Kingscourt' and 'Cromarty' both yellow trumpets, 'Hunter's Moon', 'Maraval' and 'Binkie' sulphury yellows. 'Binkie', which does exceptionally well, is a reversed bicolour; its curious pale greeny-yellow shows up remarkably in a large drift.

For the whites, 'Scapa', 'Bergen' and 'Kanchenjunga' are easily the best. Sometimes the very large flower of 'Kanchenjunga', when wet, becomes a bit too heavy for the stem but for growth and constitution it is first class.

Mixed plantings are generally unsatisfactory in grass as it gives a blotchy effect and because of the difference in flowering times no great show is ever achieved. It is far better to plant in large drifts of one variety, scattering the bulbs on the ground and planting them where they fall, which gives a much more natural effect.

I have, however, one mixed planting of 'Brunswick' and 'Sincerity'. 'Brunswick', a IIB with a short bright-lemon trumpet, is outstanding; it is early, lasts a long time and is quite unaffected by weather. 'Sincerity', a bicolour trumpet of the same colouring, comes into flower as 'Brunswick' goes over and carries on the display. It has the added advantage that the bulbs, being somewhat dissimilar, can be sorted out when they are lifted.

Turning now to the future, I would like to see breeders paying far more attention to the problem of raising new varieties that will consistently produce a larger proportion of good quality flowers than most varieties are doing to-day. It is no use raising a new variety that is more vivid in colour, or larger in size, if only the odd flower is of really good quality. No new variety these days should be kept unless it produces a large proportion of flowers up to standard, and will go on producing them year after year. It must also show real promise of becoming a good garden plant.

Secondly, there seems a danger that we are getting away from the essential character of the daffodil; you will all, no doubt, have seen in the hall to-day extreme examples of this where the flower is no longer recognisable as a daffodil and only resembles some unhappy malformed freak of nature. I am told, however, that they have one advantage; they can be crammed into a box and sent on a rough train journey arriving at Covent Garden looking much the same as when they were picked.

Maybe these are extreme cases but too many exhibition flowers receiving awards to-day are lacking in grace and refinement and the accent seems to be on size and colour.

I would like to illustrate this point by taking two flowers of my own breeding. The first is 'Lurgain', a yellow trumpet (Fig. 113), a 'Kings-court' × 'Cromarty' seedling which has been a reasonably successful show flower, having an Award of Merit and a number of firsts to its credit. It is also a first rate plant, being strong and vigorous, but to me it seems large and rather coarse, almost clumsy, with little, if any, poise or elegance.

In comparison 'Canisp' (Fig. 112), a borderline 2c/white trumpet, has to a marked degree all the qualities of grace and elegance that 'Lurgain' lacks.

I think in our preoccupation with size we tend to forget that the larger the flower is, the more important becomes refinement, poise and elegance if we are to avoid coarseness.

THE MODERN DAFFODIL

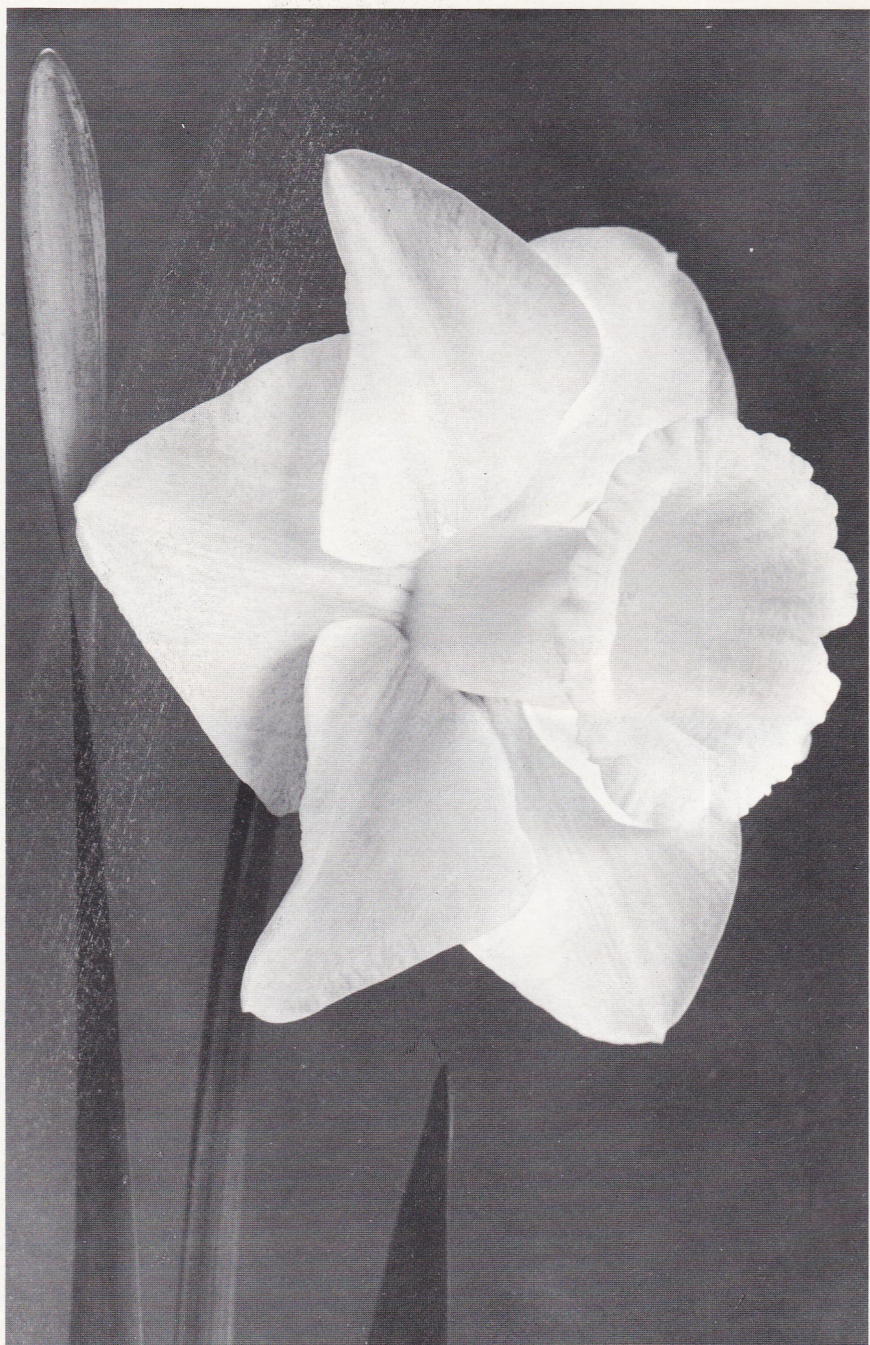


Photo: J. E. Downward

FIG. 110—*Narcissus* 'Empress of Ireland', one of the finest white daffodils raised by the late Guy L. Wilson (see p. 353)



Photo: J. E. Downward

FIG. 111—*Narcissus* 'Tudor Minstrel', a good garden variety which increases rapidly and has a short cupped flower without red in the cup (see p. 354)



FIG. 112—*Narcissus* 'Canisp', a graceful trumpet variety raised by J. S. B. Lea which was awarded a Banksian Medal for the best flower in the Daffodil Show, 1961 (see p. 357)



Lurgain