

Daffodil Delights

By Kathy Wolfe
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A perfect plant for the Pacific Northwest

“Cheerfulness,” “Bridal Crown,” “Rip Van Winkle,” “Respite,” “Tahiti” and “February Gold” are a few of the 25,000 registered named hybrids of the genus *Narcissus*, more commonly known as daffodils. These harbingers of spring are slowly awakening from their winter dormancy and will soon arrive at the perfect time to brighten our days in the landscape, pots, and fields and in bouquets in our homes. Daffodils symbolize rebirth and new beginnings, and a bunch of the blossoms is said to foretell joy and happiness ahead.

Daffodils are a perfect plant for the Pacific Northwest. They are true perennials which come back year after year if given a good amount of sunlight, moisture at the right time and a fertile, well-drained soil. They prefer to spend the dormant summer months in a dry bed and many require around sixteen weeks of cold below 40 °F during their winter cycle. Their roots flourish at 50 – 60 °F, measured at a 6” depth of soil, which is perfect for our October through November planting season. Diseases are minimal and, because they are poisonous, they are rarely disturbed by nibbling creatures, although slugs and snails may crawl up the stem and eat the petals. With varied sizes, shapes, fragrance and color, daffodils blend beautifully in almost every landscape.

Narcissi were originally native to meadows and woodlands of Southwestern Europe and North Africa. They were brought to England by the Romans and to the Far East by traders prior to the 10th century. The flowers became popular in Europe after the 16th century. By the late 19th century they were grown in the Netherlands as a commercial crop. Many homesteads in America still have patches of daffodils growing from bulbs brought over from immigrant families.

Using the Royal Horticultural Society system of classifications, there are thirteen divisions daffodils fall into. Classifications are based upon the height and type of flower. Daffodils consist of the outer petals (collectively called the perianth) and usually inner petals fused to a tube (called the cup or corona). The cup or trumpet may be long or short, ruffled or plain. The size relationship between the outer petals and the cup, as well as the form of the cup, help determine classifications.

Divisions include Trumpet; Large-cupped; Small-cupped; Doubles; Triandrus; Cyclamineus; Jonquilla; Tazetta; Poeticus; *Blubocodium*; Split-cupped (two types here are Split-cupped Collar and Split-cupped Papillon); Miscellaneous; and Species, Wild Variants and Wild Hybrids. Miniature daffodils fall into the same divisions as standards, only the miniatures have smaller blooms which are generally less than 2” in diameter.



Soon enough fields of daffodils will brighten the Skagit Valley. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.*

Several classifications have more fragrant flowers than others, e.g. Jonquilla which has a musky-sweet smell and Poeticus which carries a spicy scent. Some types have one flower per stem while others have multiple blooms. Choose the flower which works best in the location where it will be planted.

Buy bulbs early in the season from reputable sources for the best selection and quality. Inspect bulbs for signs of fungus, indicated by a white powdery substance, and select ones without blemishes or sunken areas. Choose colors that will fit into your landscape. While soft, luminous yellows are most popular, but reds and oranges can be focally effective. Soft and frilly pink and rose varieties offer a different mood, while whites blend more subtly into any landscape.

Choose bulbs of early, mid and late varieties for the longest bloom season. Fragrant types are well suited for plantings or pots placed near an entrance or walkway.

Bulbs can be planted from October through mid-December (if the ground is not frozen). Choose a sunny, well-drained area and plant in groups rather than in rows for the most pleasing effect. Dig a hole three times the height of the bulb. Leave 2" – 6" between bulbs if planting in one hole. Remember that they need room to make more bulbs over time. When planting in pots, bulbs can be crowded more closely.

Fertilizer is not necessary but can be incorporated into the soil and added after blooming is over. After bloom, leave foliage on the plant until it yellows and dies off. Don't band or tie the foliage for neatness. The leaves are the source of nutrition for next year's flowers, and banding, braiding or tying leaves blocks the flow of nutrients to the bulb. If you prefer a tidier look to your bed, plant bulbs with early perennials and deciduous shrubs which will hide the yellowing leaves as the season moves forward. Hellebores, Hosta and lady's mantle may be appropriate companions.

For cut flowers, pick daffodils as they first begin to open. Cut them off at ground level then add to a water-filled vase. If arranging them with other flowers, place them in tepid water overnight to dilute the poisonous sap before getting fresh water and adding other flowers. Cut tulips may not last as long in an arrangement mixed with daffodils.



Daffodils in field close up. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

After several years, you may see more leaves and fewer blooms on your plantings. This is a signal that they need to be divided and replanted. Pull up and separate bulbs after the leaves have turned yellow (probably sometime in June), and replant any healthy bulbs using your original spacing. They should be happy and prosper once again.

Keep an eye out during bloom season for daffodils you particularly like so you can replicate them in your yard. Bulb catalogs, gardening blogs, nurseries and friends can

be good sources for great inspiration. Whether you have a large lot or small patio, there is always room to add a touch of delightful daffodils to your world.

RESOURCES:

- "The Dazzling Diversity of Daffodils." Sandra Mason, Extension Educator, Horticulture. University of Illinois Extensive at Urbana- Champaign, College of ACES. 2016.
- "Drought Tolerant Daffodils." Lucy Tolmach. Pacific Horticultural Society. July 2012.
- "Daffodils: Antique and Fragrant." Chet Grabowski. Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Master Gardener. Denver County. 01/05/2010.
- "Daffodils Are Almost Perfect." Valerie Easton. The Seattle Times. March 13, 2015.
- "Daffodils Rarely Disappoint." Bonnie Preston. University of California Cooperative Extension. Tulare/Kings Counties. November, 16, 2006.
- "Daffodils Divisions Using the Royal Horticultural Society System of Classification." The American Daffodil Society. <http://daffodilsusa.org/daffodil-info/daffodil-divisions-cultivars/>