

“A Host of Golden Daffodils”

Daffodils are a favorite flower of mine. Their cheerful yellow flowers are the signature plant of early spring. While they are not native to our country they have naturalized well. Daffodils are so long lived that their flowers often mark the site of an old homestead that has long since crumbled away. One reason they last so long is the lack of pests due to a poisonous alkaloid in the bulbs. But there is little reason to worry about children or pets eating them since the alkaloid is so distasteful. Since I am a daffodil nut we have a lot of different varieties that extends their bloom time from early January through April. Their flowers are rarely hurt by Georgia's fluctuating end of winter temperatures.

Narcissus is the Latin name for this genus of the plant kingdom. From 50 to 100 native species originating in Southwestern Europe and Northern Africa we now have some 25,000 cultivars. A member of the Amaryllidaceae family, flowers are usually shades of yellow to white in various combinations. The six petals comprise a saucer-like perianth, from which arises a corona, or crown, that is cup or trumpet-shaped. There is such variation in color, size, fragrance, number of flowers per stalk and bloom time that in 1950 the Royal Horticultural Society in England established 12 official divisions.

In Greek mythology Narcissus was a beautiful golden haired youth who was so proud of his own looks that he rejected all others. Among those rejected was the nymph Echo, who lived the rest of her life in the woods, her form fading from grief until all that remained was her voice – an echo. Holding Narcissus responsible for Echo's fate the gods punished him in kind. While drinking from a pool of water he became so entranced with his own reflection that he pinned away and was transformed into the flower that bears his name.

Daffodils are also mentioned in the writings of Homer, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth. Often associated with death they were found preserved in the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs. In the Victorian era those with strong fragrances were feared to cause a person who smelled them too long or too deeply to fall into a coma so daffodils were rarely used for cut flowers. In the language of flowers, narcissus stands for egotism and conceit. But that is too negative for a truly perennial flower that gives so much pleasure every spring.

Cultural requirements for daffodils are fairly simple. Choose a well-drained location that is sunny in the spring and plant your bulbs in late fall (soil temperature below 60 degrees). They need good moisture when growing but must be well drained in the summer when they are dormant. Avoid mixed bags of bulbs. You will get a much better effect planting larger groups of the same cultivar. In our garden, almost every flowerbed has daffodils mixed between the perennials and shrubs. Their leaves need to be left uncut (please no braiding, twisting or folding) until they naturally fade in order to store enough energy for next year's flowers. Deadheading is mostly an aesthetic choice since most do not produce viable seed. If you choose to, simply snap off the spent flower head and leave the stem as it will also photosynthesize. To hide the fading foliage simply plant daffodils toward the back or middle of beds so later emerging perennials take the stage. Under deciduous trees those perennials could be hostas, ferns, or astilbe. In sunny beds daffodils are easily followed by daylilies but any later emerging perennial works.

Companion plants with similar bloom times only increases your wow factor. We enjoy them planted with spring blooming ground covers like *vinca minor* or thrift, *Phlox subulata*, or in beds of pansies or violas. They compliment *Forsythia and Spirea*, *Magnolia soulangiana*, and *Crocus*. The miniature daffodils look terrific with *Helleborus*, in rock gardens, and container plantings. The combinations are almost limitless.

Since I am not worried about falling into a coma, we enjoy cutting some to enjoy inside. While the flowers last longer (weeks instead of days) outside the best remedy is to plant lots of bulbs so you won't miss the ones picked. When doing a large arrangement of mixed flowers I will prep the daffodils in a separate container before arranging since their fresh juices have a wilting effect on some cut flowers.

Daffodil bulbs are available everywhere in the fall but to get better selection and a price break consider placing your order in June. I don't think you can ever have too many daffodils.