

IN PRAISE OF FOLLIES!

By Lawrence Trevanion



'Ice Follies' is one of the hardiest of all daffodils. It is showy. And it is obviously well suited to the dry bulb trade. These are qualities that have made it one of the most common daffodils. Daffodil breeders might hope to rival it but it is difficult to see how such a good commercial daffodil could be replaced. It seems likely that something new and novel, and not plants that are slow incremental improvements, will replace 'Ice Follies'.

One could argue that daffodil breeding itself is a folly. It takes years to obtain a flower from seed and years more to have any sort of quantity of that flower. The logistics of breeding means that only exceptional specimens can be kept and so a great quantity of merely good flowers get thrown away. A breeder finds themselves in the position of the wine connoisseur who, rather than just enjoying wines, specialises in finding fault with them.

The breeding of daffodils in the British spring show tradition has been pursued for well over a century and the effect of incremental improvements has been remarkable. The orange/red colour from small cupped poeticus daffodils has been transferred to trumpets and the colour pink has been recognised and refined such that even intense red/pinks are now available. Size, symmetry, poise, smoothness, substance, plant habit and strong stems have all been developed. Daffodils of this kind are now so highly bred that very good flowers can be reliably bred

from them. But apart from breeding things that are especially suited to one's own conditions (and producing oranges and pinks that are more sun-proof) making a genuine contribution in this tradition, is very difficult.

There is still a great deal of breeding to be done however. The quality and colour of standard daffodils has not been transferred to miniature daffodils; it has not been transferred to the bell-like form of 'triandrus' daffodils, or the cyclamen-like form of 'cyclamineus' daffodils, the multi-headed forms of jonquils and tazettas, or the curious little hoop-petticoats. All these areas of breeding involve serious fertility problems and so a knowledge of basic genetics and a microscope for looking at the viability of pollen, is useful. There are other types of daffodils that have hardly been explored at all. In addition to all this, the full flowering season, which in Canberra extends from March to almost November, has almost been completely neglected.

My own interest is in all types of narcissus across the entire flowering period with a view to producing fertile hybrids with the colour and quality of our best daffodils.

The first narcissus to flower in Canberra are the tazetta group (jonquils in the florist trade). The first tazetta to flower is a species called *N. elegans*. It is a thin weedy thing of 'no horticultural merit' that has been completely overlooked by those trying to breed early tazettas. My folly of using it as a parent has led to the marvellous 'First Stanza' 8W-O – a vigorous, pleasantly scented, autumn flowering tazetta.

Although there was a strong Dutch tradition of tazetta breeding centuries ago, the current foundation has been laid by Bill Welch from California. He has been collecting and breeding tazettas for decades. He works more with populations than individuals, hence his extremely variable 'Autumn Colors'. 'First Stanza' crossed with

these is producing very fine autumn flowering tazettas. There are also winter and spring flowering tazettas but, being a bit frost tender, I find them to be most exceptional as autumn flowering plants.

Another disregarded autumn species is the green flowering *N. viridiflorus*. It was first pursued by another Californian, Manuel Lima, who was especially interested in green flowers. *N. viridiflorus* has since proven to produce fertile hybrids with the standard spring flowering daffodils. It is now emerging that it can contribute increased vase life and repeat flowering in its hybrids. Fertile hybrids of this type are now well established. They start in late autumn. Some are superb, deliciously scented, winter flowers but they benefit from a small amount of protection from frost. 'Mesa Verde' is a highly regarded green spring show flower. Fertile spring flowers look like a very achievable project for breeders who are interested in pure green or green accents in daffodils.

The bulbocodiums are a diverse group ranging in flowering time from autumn to some of the latest spring daffodils. These too were ignored for a long time by daffodil breeders. They are frost hardy winter flowerers in Canberra and for that reason alone deserve special attention. It is now clear that they can also have great vigour and can produce a floral mass relative to leaf and stem



'First Stanza'



'Gold Step' seedling

that is superior to all other daffodils.

My own recently named 'Gold Step', a hybrid between a bulbocodium and a standard daffodil, is impressive in its own right. It is also quite fertile and is proving to be a parent and grandparent of a diversity of hybrids, many with unexpected fertility. As a parent it seems certain to transform division 10 and perhaps other divisions as well.

N. cyclamineus is the species mainly responsible for division 6 in the daffodil classification. It is closely related to the standard spring flowering daffodils and for that reason much progress has been made in this type. There are sterility problems but, with some good advice, fertile breeding lines can be established.

The dainty bell-like form of *N. triandrus* is proving one of the most difficult to transform with the colour and quality of standard daffodils. There is a sterility barrier that is fairly difficult. Beyond this is the problem that



N. nobilis

the sorts of parents that would be most useful for introducing quality and colour are those that are usually discarded. The ideal standard parent would hang its head, have reflexed petals and have more than one floret to a stem. A century or so of breeding has *not* had this objective in mind.

By far the greatest proportion of my own narcissus breeding folly has been the breeding of standard daffodils that flower before, during and after the show season in all the various shapes and colours currently possible. The plantings are unwatered so the flowers that persist and impress under these conditions are the ones best suited to the climate as it is. The breeding is informed by the best exhibition standards, I hope, but the objectives are broader than that. A period of wide outbreeding is now being consolidated such that flowers are emerging in purer colours but with greatly improved quality and vigour.

Daffodils are Mediterranean so it is unsurprising that new areas of breeding are being pursued in Mediterranean climates. Species range in size from tiny *N. scaberulus* to *N. nobilis* at over 12.5 cm, and they flower in autumn, winter and spring. In Canberra our winters are a touch too frosty, but on the whole it is a good average climate for daffodils.

For those interested in the folly of breeding daffodils there is plenty of scope for contributing to our shows and our gardens!