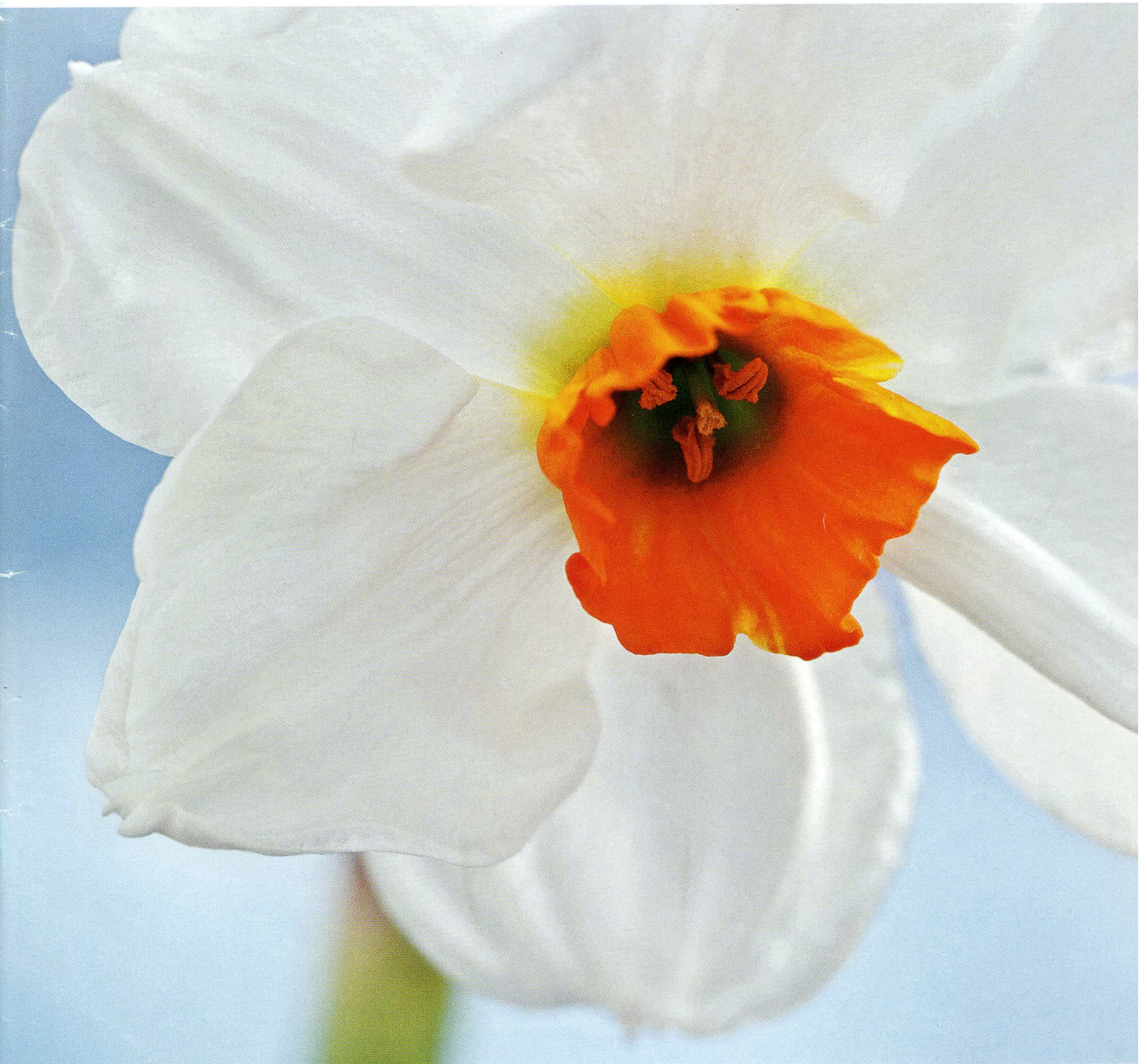


THE GARDEN

March 2011 | £4.25 | www.rhs.org.uk



VINTAGE DAFFODILS
IDEAS FOR STAKING PERENNIALS



Narcissus
'Feu de Joie'

This distinctive double has slender white petals thrown from a mass of fiery orange at its centre. A robust garden plant, introduced before 1927, it was widely planted during the 1920s and 30s



Croft originals

Many older daffodils have a beguiling beauty and grace that more modern hybrids can lack. **Jo Whittingham** visits a couple in northwest Scotland who have amassed a collection of *Narcissus* cultivars developed before 1930. Photography by Andrea Jones

On the shores of Loch Ewe in Wester Ross, Highland, Croft 16 is the home and nursery of Duncan and Kate Donald, avid collectors of pre-1930s cultivars of daffodil



A CROFT ON the sparkling shores of Loch Ewe, in Wester Ross, 60 miles northwest of Inverness, looking across the water to Sutherland's dramatic, snow-dusted peaks, is the remote and beautiful home of Croft 16 Daffodils. It is an extraordinary venture born of one couple's passion for old daffodil hybrids, many of which are on the brink of being lost to cultivation.

For 25 years Duncan and Kate Donald have been tracking down, collecting and identifying old daffodil cultivars bred before 1930. Now, with 415 of these early hybrids assembled, it is clear they remain besotted by their delicate, pastel-tinted flowers and slightly floppy, old-fashioned charm, so distinct from the vivid colours and upright perfection of many later cultivars.

Kate's interest was piqued when she spent a scholarship year in the 1970s at Tresco Abbey Gardens on the Isles of Scilly and later studied the islands' once-flourishing cut-daffodil industry. In 1983 she became International Daffodil Registrar and in 1984, when Duncan became Curator of the Chelsea Physic Garden in London, they found space for the burgeoning daffodil collection

that has moved with them ever since.

It was while Duncan was working as Property Manager for the National Trust for Scotland, at nearby Inverewe, that they spotted the croft's wonderful location and generous plot, and by late 2005 the couple had set up both home and nursery there. The stony, well-drained soil of the site's raised beach allows daffodils to flourish, while the area's high rainfall and loch-side location, combined with the warming influence of the North Atlantic Drift (fed by the Gulf Stream) on Scotland's west coast, means winters are wet and surprisingly mild, although the gales are unforgiving.

Long flowering season

Even this far north the first buds of *Narcissus* 'Magnificence', an all-yellow selection with a long trumpet, will usually break in early March, with the display building to a crescendo of uplifting tones of lemon, primrose, sulphur, milky white and saffron orange by mid-April. Only then can the amazing diversity of these old cultivars be fully appreciated, as their modestly sized blooms, often considered huge in their day, nod demurely above the tips of

strong clumps of foliage. Last to flower are the cultivars derived from *Narcissus poeticus*, such as *N.* 'Horace', in late May or June, with their distinctive flat, white 'petals' (called perianth segments) and small, red-rimmed central disc.

Gardeners since the Middle Ages have cultivated daffodil species, such as native *N. pseudonarcissus*, and their variants but deliberate breeding to increase the diversity of garden daffodils only began in earnest in the mid-19th century. Many of these early cultivars were widely grown but have since been swept from borders and nursery catalogues on a tide of bigger and bolder selections.

Part of the attraction of pre-1930 cultivars for the Donalds is preventing these bulbs being lost from cultivation for good. 'There's a vulnerability to them,' says Duncan, 'and yet underlying that there's a toughness because they have survived. Our particular buzz has come from the chase of trying to find these things: to find them before it's too late.'

One of the oldest selections growing at Croft 16 is *Narcissus* 'Horsfieldii', the elegantly flared yellow trumpets and milk-white perianth of which must have delighted weaver and daffodil enthusiast

HERITAGE CULTIVARS AT CROFT 16 DAFFODILS



'Horace'

Derived from *Narcissus poeticus*, this pre-1894 cultivar with broad white perianth segments (petals) and a red-edged central disc was once a popular garden cultivar



'Horsfieldii'

One of earliest hybrids of known origin, raised by John Horsefield around 1845 and named in 1851. Its showy white and yellow flowers have enduring appeal



'Havelock'

Bred before 1927, the yellow saffron-tinted flowers of this cultivar were found at Threave Garden and identified from a painting in the Lindley Library



'Emperor'

One of the first crosses made by early daffodil breeder William Backhouse (1807-1869), this slightly tousled yellow trumpet created a sensation in its day



Duncan and Kate Donald try to confirm the identity of an old selection of daffodil growing at their home and nursery, Croft 16, beside Loch Ewe

John Horsefield when he raised it in around 1845. Another of the Donalds' favourites is *N. 'Emperor'*, one of the first of many named hybrids produced by Co. Durham banker and renowned daffodil breeder William Backhouse in about 1865. With its charming yellow trumpet, slightly ruffled in appearance, *N. 'Emperor'* has proved extremely tough and is still often found naturalised in old gardens where it may have been planted a century ago.

Searching for old cultivars

Such long-established gardens are the perfect hunting ground for new additions to the collection, but in the early days Duncan and Kate bought commercially available bulbs and spent Easter holidays scouring roadside verges and the gardens of derelict cottages for anything of interest. Gradually daffodil collections in old gardens started to come to light. The couple would visit these, photograph and work hard to identify plants, but they soon realised without growing the plants themselves the whole endeavour would be much more difficult.

'We got more hard-nosed about asking for material from people, often just a bulb or two,' says Duncan. 'At least that ►



'Marmorata'

Bulbs of this cultivar, developed before 1919, were rescued by Duncan Donald from a collection that was being moved as part of a garden redevelopment



'Amabilis'

Developed by breeder Edward Leeds before his death in 1877, the Donalds received a named example, confirmed its identity and have since found it again



'Weardale Perfection'

Once considered the pinnacle of breeding due to its large size and pale lemon colour, this daffodil, bred before 1869, was a triumph for William Backhouse

'Tenedos'

An elegant, large white daffodil with a gently flared cream trumpet, bred in Wiltshire by Rev Engleheart (1851-1936) and named in 1917 by Ian Brodie of Brodie (1868-1943)

way the work we were putting in was developing a named research collection, which could be of some conservational or educational value.'

Occasionally a daffodil flower is so distinctive it can be named from old pictures and descriptions alone. The nodding, starry flowers of a specimen from the garden at Cotehele in Cornwall were unmistakably *Narcissus* 'Elegans', an early cultivar, bred before 1851, waiting to be rediscovered. However, even with their expertise, the Donalds prefer some kind of provenance, be it a label or planting list, from gardens where they find vintage daffodils, to help narrow down potential names. Their stock of exuberant double *N.* 'Feu de Joie' was found in a garden in the Scottish Borders with a planting list from the 1950s, which made identifying the selection relatively straightforward.

The couple have also rescued bulbs from collections that have since been dispersed or destroyed. The owners of one garden in northeast Scotland invited Duncan to take bulbs from labelled plantings before they were removed to make way for a rose garden. So the stock of *N.* 'Marmorata' from there may

be the last identifiable from gardens. Time-consuming as their own collection is in spring, Kate and Duncan still look for undiscovered named stocks that might identify mystery daffodils in their nursery, or even contain an elusive cultivar from the past yet to be rediscovered, such as pale yellow *N.* 'Katherine Spurrell'.

'MANY OF THESE DAFFODILS TEETER ON THE EDGE OF EXTINCTION'

Undemanding appeal

The cachet for plantsmen and collectors of obtaining something rare is obvious, but since they began selling bulbs in 2009 the Donalds have been delighted to find that the elegance of pre-1930 daffodils appeals to many gardeners. They offer antidotes to the large, intensely coloured flowers and upright uniformity of modern cultivars, and this subtle, old-fashioned grace lends itself to planting in borders or naturalising in grass.

They are also undemanding to grow. Kate's mantra is 'look after the foliage and the flowers will look after themselves', so she and Duncan allow the leaves to die down naturally, never tying them up or mowing early. They plant bulbs at least 15cm (6in) deep, and regularly lift and split congested clumps to encourage flowering. They also say it

helps to consider the ancestry of each cultivar – for example those with *Narcissus jonquilla* in their parentage, such as *N.* 'Lanarth', prefer damp conditions while those related to *N. tazetta*, such as *N.* 'Avalanche', like the dry soil at the base of a sunny wall.

Many of these daffodils teeter on the edge of extinction, not for being fragile or difficult, but because they were left behind by gardening fashion. As so often happens, though, it seems tastes have come full circle, and thanks to the Donalds' efforts these delicate beauties still exist to fill gardens once more. ■

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● Many *Narcissus* cultivars will be on show in the daffodil competitions at the RHS Great London Plant Fair, 29–30 Mar, in the RHS Horticultural Halls, London SW1; see www.rhs.org.uk/shows

● See *The Garden*, February, pp118–121, for Roy Lancaster's profile of daffodil breeder Ron Scamp

@ Visit 'March 2011' at www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden for more heritage daffodils from RHS Recommended Gardens



'Sulphur Phoenix'

The origins of this delicate old double are unknown, but records of its cultivation go back to 1820. The flowers fade with age from primrose to pale buttermilk



'Cernuus Plenus'

This creamy white double-flowered selection was first grown before 1830 and is still loved by many who see it, although it is slow to bulk up



'Avalanche'

Related to *N. tazetta*, this fragrant cultivar bears up to 12 small white flowers with neat yellow coronas per stem. Bred pre-1906, but given its current name in 1955



'Conspicuous'

This late-flowering cultivar was introduced before 1869 and has star-shaped, lemon flowers with a small, frilled, orange-tipped cup at its centre

IDENTIFYING OLDER SELECTIONS

Many pre-1930 hybrids at Croft 16 Daffodils remain un-named, so each year the Donalds spend hours trying to identify them. They have a library of old catalogue photographs, books and journals, but putting a name to a flower can still be extremely difficult. Their specialist knowledge alone often is not enough, so clues from the source of the bulb, such as ticks in an old catalogue or an original planting list, can help enormously when naming long-forgotten cultivars.

A breakthrough came at Threave Garden, in Dumfries and Galloway, where they found that the old head gardener's recollections of an unlabelled collection, planted in the 1930s and 40s, had been recorded.

Building up their own collection has been a great advantage because flowering time, scent and fading flower colour are difficult to convey in photographs and descriptions. 'To tell some of these cultivars apart you really do need to grow them side by side. It's quite a long, drawn-out process,' says Duncan.

'Lucifer'

Still often grown today for its rather nodding orange and soft white flowers, this attractive Irish hybrid was introduced before 1890

