

Paint Gloucester Yellow Next Spring!

By Susan Camp

These mid-October days remain pleasant, but the slanting, golden sunlight and cool nights tell us that fall has arrived in Gloucester. You know what that means: It's time to think about planting daffodils! Our goal should be to encase Gloucester County in shades of shimmering yellow, white, pink, and salmon for the 2018 Daffodil Festival.

To that end, I envision every citizen of Gloucester planting some new bulbs. If you have neglected beds, as we have, dig up and separate the bulbs. Replant some, share others with family, friends, and neighbors. Talk to your children's teachers, Sunday School teachers, and scout leaders. Volunteer to show schoolchildren how to start their own daffodil gardens. Offer excess bulbs to local convalescent centers and assisted living facilities that have courtyard gardens for the residents to enjoy.

In our region, the best daffodil planting time is mid to late November when the soil temperature reaches below 60 degrees, so we still have several weeks to choose old favorites or new varieties and prepare the beds or containers.

Daffodils (*Narcissus* spp.) require a minimum of 5 to 6 hours of sunshine each day and rich, well-drained, slightly acidic (pH 6 to 7) soil. Since the soil on the Middle Peninsula tends to be sandy or clayey, or a combination of both, the needed ingredient is organic matter. The American Daffodil Society (ADS) recommends turning over the soil to a depth of 12 inches and adding compost. Well-rotted chicken, horse, or cow manure and finely ground leaf compost are other suggested soil amendments.

Plant daffodil bulbs with the pointed end up, to a depth of two to four times the diameter of the bulb and about three times the bulb's diameter apart. The ADS recommends a light top-dressing of 5-10-10 (Nitrogen-Phosphorus-Potassium) fertilizer upon planting, again when leaf tips sprout, and a third time when they flower with 0-10-10- or 0-0-50. If you decide to use chemical fertilizer, go easy on the nitrogen, or you will have lovely green leaves and few blossoms.

Newly planted daffodil bulbs need plenty of water, but poor drainage will cause the bulbs to rot. If rainfall is sparse, continue watering at a rate of ½ to 1 inch of water each week through the spring blooming season. In summer, the dormant bulbs do not require water.

Mulch is essential to keep bulbs cool and moist during the summer, and to discourage weeds. Pine bark, pine straw, and finely-ground hardwood mulch make excellent covers for daffodil beds.

After daffodils bloom, leave the foliage in place until it turns brown. Don't tie it up or braid it into fanciful designs. This is difficult for people who prefer neat garden beds, but the green foliage provides food to the bulb for the next flowering season. If you mow the leaves, you will have few blooms next spring. Daylilies (*Hemerocallis* spp.), with their long, green leaves and colorful, summer-blooming flowers, provide good camouflage for scruffy daffodil foliage.

Few insect pests and diseases attack daffodils, although a fungus can cause basal rot of the bulbs, especially if they are allowed to remain in a wet environment.

Dig up and separate bulbs every 3 to 5 years to insure full blooming capacity, or, do like me, and promise yourself to dig them up, then find something else to do that is more pressing.

That's about it. Daffodils are easy to grow perennials that provide welcome color after the long winter. Sources include VCE Publication 426-201 "Flowering Bulbs: Culture and Maintenance" and the book "Daffodils for American Gardens" (1995) by Brent and Becky Heath.

If you read the article in last week's Gazette-Journal, you saw that a new class in the Gloucester Daffodil Show next spring will include entries from residents of Gloucester County and the rest of the Middle Peninsula. If you would like to learn about growing and showing daffodils, Brent Heath will offer a seminar on Tuesday, November 14 at 7:00 p.m. at Brent and Becky's Bulbs.

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