

The Stocking Stuffer that Keeps on Giving!

As the days shorten, so does the time left for securing those last minute gifts that do not look like a last minute act of desperation. What could be more fun to find in the toe of your Christmas stocking than a choice daffodil bulb? True, a bulb does not need batteries, but please do realize that most children would enjoy finding the perfect sunny spot to plant it, would be excited to see the first green emerge and over the years, would wonder to see that single daffodil become a colony to welcome spring.

For real inspiration go to visit the shop at Brent & Becky's Bulbs. Even easier is to visit www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com but at any time of year walking the display gardens is an educational trek. It is a delight to see the charming flower-accented gifts and practical tools in the shop that will solve many a gift-giving challenge.

One soft green vase caught my eye, its surface accented with a spray of lilies of the valley in relief. If you were thinking "toaster" for a bride, a glance at this vase will change your mind. In the shop's display of bulbs you can find those appropriate for forcing into bloom and others that promise to provide the artistry needed for winning blue ribbons.

If you are chary of buying bulbs in December, don't be. For years I planted bulbs between Christmas and New Year's Day. In our climate 'fall' can be stretched several days past the beginning of winter. If you begin to grow daffodils, you may become addicted. When I look through Brent and Beck's catalog I remember narcissus I once had. Can't remember the streets, nor the house numbers but the names, -Ceylon, Actaea, Barrett Browning – remain. Some I planted at this garden a decade ago have stopped blooming. Scraps of seedlings turned into dense trees shading them out.

Daffodils need sun, at least six hours. However if you are growing those with delicate pink or apricot coronas, either pick them as soon as they open or grow them in partial shade. Actually, a clump of them opening over several days will have varying shades of pink and the contrast is lovely.

Once you fall in love with this local belle you may want to show them. In 2010 the dates of the 60th Annual Daffodil Show are March 27 and 28, sponsored by the Garden club of Gloucester during the Daffodil Festival. For details check www.gloucesterdaffodils.blogspot.com.

When you begin showing you will need to know into what divisions your flowers belong. There are 11 divisions, well, 12, if you count the last, 'miscellaneous'! For example division 1 is trumpet cultivars and division 2 is large-cupped. Before you ask if a trumpet isn't a large cup, let me assure you it is. Division 1 cups (coronas) are as long as, or longer, than the perianth segments. As an aside, the perianth consists of 6 segments, 3 petals and 3 sepals. They look alike but the sepals are the three behind the petals. Division 2, the large-cupped flower has a cup more than 1/3 the length of the petals but not as long as the petals. Division 3, the small-cupped narcissus has a cup up to 1/3 the length of the perianth segments. Division 4 and on: Double, Triandrus, Cyclamineus, Jonquilla, Tazetta, Poeticus, Species and Wild Forms, Split-corona.

The cultivation of our county's official flower is not complicated: one essential is good soil. To quote Brent Heath, "Compost, compost, compost." Ignore the instructions on those bags of bulb food that tell you to mix their product into the planting hole. By applying compost as a top dressing each fall you will be adding nutrients to the soil feeding the bulb for its next appearance. Extended use of

chemical fertilizers impoverishes soil over time diminishing the nutritional value of the food grown in it. Flowers, too, need healthy soil.

After blooming, bulbs have a dormant period a time when they require excellent drainage. It is important to avoid planting them where water stands after a downpour. Heaping up the soil, rich with compost, into a berm assures their survival. One of the joys of growing bulbs is they can stay put for generations. However, if you wish to move or divide them, dig up the clump when the foliage is beginning to turn yellow. Don't pry the babies from the mother bulb but replant them entire, giving each bulb space. Some gardeners are such neatniks they ball up the foliage when the flowers fade and put a rubber band around them as if it were a child's pigtail. Awful: those leaves are busy feeding the bulb and need to be left alone to do their job. Plant daffodils with daylilies or other foliaged plants and you won't notice the limp leaves. Companion plants help soak up summer rains so your bulbs are less likely to be over-watered.