

DAFFODILS: getting the best flowers you can

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At this stage of the year your daffodils will be in the ground and growing well. You wait expectantly for the flowers that spring will bring. The question now is how do you get the best flowers you can from your bulbs and, if you are going to pick (or show) them, when and how to pick them for best results.

Growing the “best” flowers

I have heard it said that the flower is formed in the bulb the year before and there is little you can do now to improve them. This is only partly true. Yes, the flower forms the previous season but how you grow them this year will make an enormous difference to how good the flowers are.

There are three things that will make a real difference to the quality of this year’s flowers – water, Water and WATER. People often see the size and the condition of flowers grown in Tasmania or New Zealand and wonder what they are being fed. The answer is simple – water.

It is true that daffodils like good drainage and do not like to be wet over summer – particularly in Canberra where wet ground and hot water is a recipe for disaster. But as a general rule most daffodils love water over winter and early spring. As long as the ground does not become a stagnant swamp, it is almost impossible to over-water them – some of them will even grow in flowing water over the winter months.

A good water supply will also improve the stem and the quality of next year’s flower. So how much is enough water. I have heard it argued by some growers that at least 50 mm a week is required – about the amount we get a month over winter in Canberra. Last winter we got even less and the stems and flowers of unwatered bulbs were poor.

If you are going to water, avoid watering the flowers as this risks directly damaging them and making them more prone to wind damage – a wet daffodil in a strong wind will split almost every time.

The other ingredient that will help colour and stem in some cases is potash. Potash will also assist in the development of quality bulbs for next year.

The only real regular pests are snails and slugs which appear to be attracted to the best flowers. There are not normally many of them around in early spring but some form of control may be required. In some parts of New Zealand bumble bees would cut holes in the trumpet/cup, but we do not have that problem here.

Picking the flowers

One of the tricks for those of us who show our daffodils is to know when to pick the flowers. Most flowers are picked too young. In cool weather it can take up to a week for a flower to reach its peak – with most of the good flowers I have grown I have had to consciously resist the urge to pick them for 3 or 4 days and “take the risk” with the weather. Unfortunately this does not always work and a good spring storm with the combination of heavy rain and strong winds will wreak havoc.

There are some exceptions to this practice. There are some varieties where the cups “burn” in the sun – particularly those with vibrant red cups. Here it is critical to understand the variety. Some can be left 3 or 4 days with little trouble (or with a bit of cover). Others after 2 or 2 days will need to be picked (no matter how good your covers). And others you can pick as they first open and allow to come out in a cool dark place (not the fridge!)

How to pick the flowers is a subject of much discussion. The real issue here is the potential spread of virus problems from one bulb to another. It has been suggested that this risk is increased with the use of a knife or other mechanical devices. Some people argue to snap the flowers off. I personally think the aim should be to exclude virus as much as possible and that reduces the magnitude of the potential problem. So find a method that works for you.

After the flowers are picked, I re-cut the stems and put them in water as far up the stem as I can. The flowers are then held in a cool dark place or in a fridge until the day I want them. One trick is to remove the flowers from the fridge the day before you want them. You might lose some but the ones that survive will look that much better.