

Narcissus Hybridisation

By Tony Davis

Daffodil hybridisation has been taking place at a great pace for more than a century. Men of the cloth such as Rev. George Englehart were quite prolific in the late 1800s and early 1900s and many of the modern hybrids can be shown to be direct descendants of those early efforts. With about 30,000 named hybrids registered on the official register it seems fair to ask why we are still happily pressing ahead in this area. To put it in context, there have been many significant changes in the daffodil world.

Perhaps the most obvious developments have come in the availability of new colours e.g. those with pink or all red trumpets may have existed in the minds of early breeders but it took a great many years for them to be a reality. Now the dream may be all pink or all red cultivars. These should be possible as the colour genes are well established. All we have to do is get them in the right places!



Bundanoon

Changes in form and size have also been very pronounced while greater substance in the petals has also been achieved. This latter attribute has been most essential to withstand the elements. The new hybrids are getting close to being circular in shape and wind damage with such a form would be substantial without the improved substance that has gone with it.

At this point let me give you a pen picture of one of our local hybridisers. He is a little old man who can be seen every day in September wandering along his rows of seedlings. He will probably be wearing a Russian cap to keep out the chill, carrying a somewhat dog-eared note book, a pocket full of assorted pens, an old school protractor, tweezers, and always seems to have a great many old bread tags. He stops regularly to inspect the

'children', usually shakes his head and moves on to the next in line. Occasionally he actually breaks into a half smile and very, very rarely he breaks into an animated dance routine. Such are the percentages of special flowers.

To give you some idea of the project let me assure you I am very small fry in the hybridisation world. Each year I plant about 1,000 seeds and wait five or so years to get the good or bad news. As a rule of thumb most hybridisers number about 1% of the new flowers for closer examination over a three or four year period. You may expect to get one in every 1,000 that has the potential to win a ribbon at a top show and perhaps about one in 10,000 that could win a best in show award. In more recent years the standard of my seedlings has improved considerably and I have been achieving a success rate at better than those above – such is the benefit of experience.

Why did I move from being an exhibitor to taking on the role of hybridising? There were a number of factors apart from a touch of madness. Firstly, I saw it as a challenge. In particular, I was frustrated with the lack of pink cupped daffodils that were suited to our growing conditions. I reasoned that it could not be all that difficult to get it right. I also felt that there was room for great improvement in split cups and why not have all yellow small cups that were strong yellow rather than the 'cream' varieties that were being offered.



Seedling 1/11

While chasing these goals I also took an interest in a broader range of daffodils. This helps to keep you happy when the more specific goals prove difficult to achieve.

I have learned a number of good lessons along the way. The first of those was to listen to all the helpful advice,

ignore some of it at your peril and, most importantly, be prepared to learn from your mistakes. Secondly, use only the best quality parents that suit your goals – they are not necessarily the latest offerings from major growers. One of the best Australian hybridisers will sometimes go back three or four generations to get a characteristic that he is seeking. I know some hybridisers spend long hours working on the pedigree of their possible crosses. I do not do this, preferring instead to follow my gut feeling. Trying to visualise the outcome of any crosses works for me – albeit with the knowledge of the results previously achieved.

Lastly, stick very close to your assessment guidelines when choosing which seedlings to keep. Basic guidelines for me are:

- Vigour – this is essential. I have thrown away many bulbs that produce show quality flowers but are very hard to keep going. There is no place for pampered pets in my beds.
- Consistency – I would much rather grow on a bulb that gives regular good quality flowers.
- Colour/sun hardiness – there is no room for wimps and poor colour.
- Size – a good big flower beats a good small one most times.

Remember there are many named cultivars that fall well short of modern standards and there is no need to add more of them.

Self assessments of your achievements are not usually made public. However, on this occasion it is worth looking at one or two of what I consider to be success stories.

In my search for pinks that thrive in our climate my best is undoubtable ‘Bundanoon’. This is a good quality pink suitable for a championship class, but will not win best in show. However, it is very vigorous and always produces show flowers. I have a number of other good pinks, but they are slower to multiply.

In regard to the split coronas I have a number of flowers of improved quality but this is still a work in progress. ‘Seedling 1/11’ seen last year at Blayney is getting close to the money.

After going down some dead-end streets I am finally getting close with the yellow small cups with some nice ‘Red Era’ seedlings showing promise.

What of the other interests along the way? There are two standouts worthy of mention. ‘Miss Rhiannon’ is a very nice 3W-YO which has won many ribbons including those at the Launceston Show. This one is very satisfying having been bred from one of my own seedlings. I am also particularly pleased with the ‘Lady Diana’ x ‘Florence Joy’ seedlings. There are quite a number of these and I have high hopes for ‘Seedling 8/10’ which was Grand Champion at Blayney last year.



Miss Rhiannon

I know it is a long shot but in case there is someone willing to get a start at hybridising I would recommend they try the following crosses

- ‘Lady Dianna’ x ‘Florence Joy’
- ‘Red Era’ x ‘Legislator’
- ‘Banker’ x any 2Y-R of good quality.

A final word of caution in case you do get involved. Remember 1,000 seeds per year adds up to a great many bulbs in a short time. I would have close to 10,000 bulbs at various stages of growth and that takes up a lot of space.



Seedling 8/10

Tony is well-known in Canberra and the NSW Southern Highlands for his gardening prowess and his outstanding successes on the show bench, winning many championships for his daffodils, in particular. At last year’s Spring Bulb & Camellia Show in Canberra, Tony won the award for the Grand Champion Daffodil with his seedling 6/09 2W-W. We look forward to his entries in spring again this year. Tony’s breeding successes have led to a number now registered on the Royal Horticultural Society’s International Daffodil Register. Some of his hybrids are available through Classic Daffodils, Victoria. [Editor]