

daffodil fanatic Jason Delaney

BY MARTY ROSS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB CARDILLO

Horticulturist and hybridizer Jason Delaney has built a career around daffodils—and he wants to share his passion for these cheerful spring bloomers with everyone.



ONE OF THE images on Jason Delaney's Facebook page shows Jason as a child, grinning in front of a daffodil backdrop. Come to think of it, many of the pictures of Delaney on Facebook show a kid with a grin and lots of daffodils. Delaney is now a very youthful 40, but before he was knee-high to a daffodil, he was already crazy about these gorgeous spring flowers, and he still is.

Delaney's life and work are both braided up with daffodils. For 20 years, until last June, he worked at the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, where he was bulb collection specialist and the champion of the Samuels and Heckman Bulb Gardens, located close to the garden's entrance. The splendid spring show in these gardens, beginning with little crocuses and snowdrops and then progressing to a breathtaking crescendo of hundreds of different daffodil cultivars, is a tribute to his favorite flower.

Even in the wide world of daffodils, Delaney is a hard man to miss. He not only knows daffodils inside and out, but is friends with hybridizers, growers, judges, and daffodil fanatics around the globe. He has been a regional director of the American Daffodil



Above: Posing in front of a daffodil backdrop during a studio photo shoot when he was six years old, Jason Delaney displays the same grin as he does today, opposite page, in a daffodil field at his parents' farm in Illinois. **Top:** A young photographer takes a shot of the daffodils in the Samuels and Heckman Bulb Gardens at the Missouri Botanical Garden, where Delaney spent the first 20 years of his career.

Society (ADS), served on the organization's national board of directors for two terms, and was chairman of the ADS's 51st annual national convention in 2005. When the World Daffodil Convention held its quadrennial meeting in St. Louis a year ago, it was as though Delaney had invited several hundred of his best friends to town.

Delaney knows plant society rules and conventions backwards and forwards and has won his share of blue ribbons exhibiting at flower shows. But he's most at home out in the garden, anticipating that thrill he still feels every year at the sight of the first ebullient spring daffodil.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

When you fall head over heels in love with a plant, it's nice to have institutional support. Delaney's supervisors at the Missouri Botanical Garden recognized his abilities right away and, over the course of his career, pretty much gave him free rein—along with a budget for purchasing prodigious numbers of spring-flowering bulbs of all kinds. When Delaney arrived in the summer of 1995 as a horticulture intern straight out of college at Michigan State University, the garden's

daffodil collection consisted of fewer than 30 cultivars. By the time he left, the garden's outstanding collection of *Narcissus* had been recognized as the ADS's first-ever Daffodil Display Garden.

At its peak, the daffodil collection exploded to nearly 700 different cultivars. Delaney acknowledges it was "a personal goal to grow as many daffodils as I could possibly squeeze in." Visitors who came to the garden expecting to see lots of big yellow daffodils were never disappointed, but Delaney also introduced them to unusual cultivars, confounding generally held assumptions and expectations about daffodils. He always made room for new hybrids, some of them lovely if frail curiosities. The daffodils he fa-



Delaney found many ways to showcase daffodils at the Missouri Botanical Garden. Above: The daffodil cultivar 'Suzy' is paired with *Fritillaria imperialis* in a border. Left: Daffodils and a variety of cool-season annuals combine in a large urn to make a sprightly spring display.

vored are, above all, excellent garden plants: showy, but adaptable, reliable, and hardy. In a presentation to the ADS at its annual meeting in 2013, Delaney referred to these old-time favorites, the classic garden daffodils, as "dear friends from our past" that have earned their places in our gardens.

It may be hard to imagine that an experienced horticulturist and daffodil expert favors tried-and-true older cultivars over budget-busting, blue-ribbon hybrids, but Delaney is not a daffodil elitist.

Fortunately for all of us, there are many fine choices. More than 25,000 daffodil

cultivars have been registered. And new cultivars with fancy pedigrees—and prices to match—are introduced every year.

A NEW VENUE

A year ago, Delaney left Missouri Botanical Garden to become the horticulture director at Bellefontaine Cemetery and Arboretum in St. Louis. Bellefontaine, which occupies 314 acres, was established in 1849 during an era when many great landscaped, parklike cemeteries were created. Delaney's interest in plants has always extended far beyond the golden spring horizon of daffodils, and

so now do his horticultural responsibilities, but one of his first projects at Bellefontaine naturally involved his favorite bulb.

Bellefontaine is the final resting place of notable soldiers, beer barons, fur traders, engineers, poets, suffragettes, rascals, politicians, and athletes, among many others. It is also a living museum of plants and landscape design, with many possibilities to explore. The cemetery's age and history have inspired Delaney to concentrate on period plants. In the fall of 2016, he planted thousands of bulbs at the cemetery, including



Over the years, Delaney added dozens of new daffodil cultivars to the bulb borders at the Missouri Botanical Gardens. From left to right, these include 'Gay Kybo', introduced in 1980; 'Edna Earl', introduced in 1950; and 'Classic Garden', introduced in 2001.

drifts of 25 different daffodil cultivars along a popular tour route through the 14 miles of roads. "We're concentrating on older varieties, nothing too new," Delaney says. The cultivars he chose for his first planting—'Mount Hood', 'Flower Record', 'Fortune', 'Stratosphere', and others—

were introduced from the 1920s through the 1940s. They're great daffodils today, and they "would have been valuable to people at the time," Delaney says. Within a few years, as more daffodils are planted, he hopes the cemetery will be added to the list of ADS display gardens.

HIS OWN COLLECTION

After hours, Delaney is the owner of PHS (Professional Horticultural Services), a one-man residential garden design and maintenance company that, not surprisingly, also specializes in growing, hybridizing, evaluating, and selling daffodils.



Delaney with his father, Don, in the tractor shed at his parents' farm in Flora, Illinois. Delaney comes by his collecting instincts naturally—his father collects tractors, farm signs, and vintage seed bags, while his mother favors Fostoria glassware.



Visitors attending the World Daffodil Convention in St. Louis last spring had a chance to compare hundreds of daffodil selections in bloom in Delaney's personal collection growing on three acres at his parents' farm in Flora, Illinois.

His formidable personal daffodil collection has its home on his parents' property in Flora, Illinois, a farming town with a tight-knit population of about 5,000, a couple of hours' drive east of St. Louis.

Jane and Don Delaney are their son's steadfast supporters. From them, he inherited the collecting gene: his mother fancies Fostoria glassware, and his father collects and shows vintage Ford tractors. Jane Delaney has also helped Jason add to his collection of bulb catalogs. This is not an idle practice for either of them: They once discovered they were bidding hotly against each other on Ebay for the same catalog.

Don Delaney, a farmer, long ago gave up a field behind the house for his son's daffodils. The daffodil planting—mapped out and meticulously marked in the field, with rows and sections of seven to 10 bulbs of each cultivar, is cataloged on 41 single-spaced pages. Last fall, the plantings expanded to fill three acres. "My lifelong dream is growing there," Delaney says. "Every variety that I can get hold of, I have."

Delaney especially favors Dutch hybrid daffodils from the 1940s to '60s, prizing their "bold, dramatic flowers." He loves split-corona daffodils, big, colorful trum-

pet daffs, and those with intense colors. He also grows and evaluates daffodils hybridized by Missouri breeders Dave Niswonger and Gary Knehans, as well as a significant number of crosses from John Reed, a hybridizer in Michigan. One of Reed's intro-

ductions, 'Jaw Breaker,' is, in a way, named after Delaney. In his formal description of the large-trumpet daffodil on Daffseek, the ADS daffodil identification website, Reed wrote, "When first seen by Jason Delaney, his mouth opened so wide, I thought his jaw would drop off, hence the name."

A GARDEN PARTY

Delaney's own seedling crosses number around 2,000. They're mostly "split coronas, daffodils with ruffled coronas and trumpets with fins," he says. "I don't breed to win blue ribbons, I breed for people to go, 'Wow.'" So far, he has registered three hybrids, including 'Orpha', a flashy orange-trumpet daffodil named after his cat; 'Nico', a fragrant white jonquilla named for another cat; and 'Copacabana', a yellow daffodil with a big orange cup, ruffled around the edges and tipped with yellow highlights.

Last spring, Delaney showed them all off, along with the thousands of other daffodils growing in fields at his parents' farm, for distinguished guests. On the final day of the World Daffodil Convention, busloads of daffodil fanatics—people who had been studying, exhibiting, talking

Resources

American Daffodil Society, www.daffodilusa.org.

Bellefontaine Cemetery and Arboretum, St. Louis, MO. www.bellefontainecemetery.org.

Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis, MO. www.mobot.org.

Sources

Brent and Becky's Bulbs, Gloucester, VA. www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com.

Colorblends, Bridgeport, CT. www.colorblends.com.

John Scheepers, Bantam, CT. www.johnscheepers.com.

PHS Daffodils, Flora, IL. www.phsdaffodils.com.

White Flower Farm, Litchfield, CT. www.whiteflowerfarm.com.

A FEW OF JASON DELANEY'S FAVORITE DAFFODILS

Conditions across the country and even within a single state make it challenging to recommend top daffodils for every gardener, so Jason Delaney advises checking with your local American Daffodil Society (ADS) club to learn the best cultivars for your region. Start at the ADS website (www.daffodilusa.org) and go to "Daffodil societies near you," then to information for local clubs.

With that said, Delaney has a few favorite daffodils that he says are adaptable, reliable, and widely available. Several on his list are Wister Award winners, recognized by the ADS for great garden performance and long-lasting blooms on tall, sturdy stems. Some are ADS Classic daffodils, cultivars registered between 1940 and 1969; a few are ADS Historic cultivars, registered or known to have been in gardens before 1940.

'**Actea**' has white petals with a flat yellow cup edged with red. Registered before 1919; ADS Historic and Wister Award.

'**Barrett Browning**' has white petals and a short, ruffled orange cup. Registered before 1945; ADS Classic and Wister Award.

'**Cassata**' is a split-cupped daffodil with white petals and a showy cup that opens yellow and fades to white. Registered in 1963; ADS Classic.

'**Congress**' is a split-cup daffodil with yellow petals and an orange cup. Registered in 1976.

'**Fortune**' has large yellow flowers and an orange cup. It blooms in early to mid-spring. Registered before 1917; ADS Historic.

'**Geranium**' produces up to six white flowers with orange cups on each stem. Registered before 1930; ADS Historic and Wister Award.

'**Golden Dawn**' has several yellow flowers with orange cups on each stem. Registered in 1958; ADS Classic.

'**Ice Follies**' is a big-trumpet daffodil with white petals and a yellow trumpet that stands tall on 26-inch stems. Registered before 1953; an ADS Classic and Wister Award winner.

'**Marieke**' produces large, rich-yellow trumpet flowers in mid-spring. Introduced in 1986. This is the best of the yellow trumpets in the Midwest, Delaney says.

'**Pink Charm**' has snow-white overlapping petals and a white cup rimmed with pink ruffles. Registered in 1977. Wister Award.

'**Stratosphere**' is a golden yellow daffodil with an orange cup, producing up to three flowers on each stem. Registered in 1968; ADS Classic and Wister Award.

'**Tahiti**' is a double daffodil; the trumpet consists of slightly shorter orange trumpet segments, whirled amid the yellow petals. Registered in 1956; ADS Classic and Wister Award.

'**Yellow Cheerfulness**' produces double yellow flowers with a bright twist of darker yellow segments in the center. Introduced before 1937; ADS Historic.

—M.R.



Delaney admires all forms of daffodils, including 'Curly Lace', left, a split-corona hybrid introduced in 2009, and *Narcissus jonquilla* 'Simplex', right, a species daffodil classified in the 18th century.

about, and photographing daffodils for five straight days, pulled up at the Delaney farm at about 11 a.m., ready for still more. Volunteers from the community, including Delaney's proud first-grade teacher, greeted visitors at tables set up with hot coffee and snacks. Mimosas were poured generously,

for this was a real celebration. Delaney, all smiles as usual, wore a little yellow daffodil pinned to his fleece vest to remind him of his friend and daffodil mentor, Jo-Anne Ohms, the owner of the mail-order bulb company John Scheepers, who wasn't able to attend the meeting.

The weather was chilly and overcast, precisely the sort of conditions in which daffodils are happiest. Out in the field, the daffodils stood straight and tall on sturdy stems, and their colors glowed. Delaney and his partner, Rob Donnelly, a social worker who has learned to appreciate daffodils, were up by the barn, talking with friends about daffodils and life in general, while a bluegrass band set up for dancing after lunch. Vases on every table, stuffed with daffodils from the exhibit hall, turned blue-ribbon winners into centerpieces.

Lunch was served and the conversation was of daffodils and of the people who grow them, know them, and love them best. These daffodil connoisseurs from around the world were ready to relax, and the setting, in the big tractor barn filled with flowers, was perfect. It was Delaney's—and every gardener's—dream of the perfect spring garden party.

Marty Ross is a garden journalist and daffodil enthusiast. She grows many daffodil cultivars in her garden in Tidewater, Virginia.