

The English Lent Lily

By Jan Dalton

The above is, perhaps, somewhat controversial to some in its choice of geographical adjective and yet, no less controversial than its currently designated botanical title *Narcissus pseudonarcissus pseudonarcissus insignis*. This latter botanical name being bestowed upon 'our' wild English daffodil by no less an authority than Pugsley. His monograph on the genus 'Section Ajax (Trumpet daffodils) 1933, attaching the varietal epithet 'insignis' as being the *N. pseudonarcissus* that grows in the area around Newent, Dymock and Ledbury where the counties of Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire share their borders. It is known as 'The Golden Triangle'. Pugsley goes on to include the extended area to the south, down to the West Country (presumably Somerset, Devon, Cornwall and Dorset?) and East through Sussex. No mention is made of how far east the area covers. Also this misses two of the most well known areas of wild daffodil populations in England, namely the 'Wordsworth' daffodils of the English Lakes National Park at Ullswater and the Farndale daffodils of the North York Moors National Park.

Whether Pugsley ignored these two major locations when describing the distribution of his *N.pseudo.pseudo.insignis* is not clear in his monograph. However, he could hardly claim not to have known about the 'Wordsworth' site as the poem alone pre-dated his monograph by over 100 years and made the area famous. What is perhaps not so widely known is the distribution of *N. pseudonarcissus* in these two northern areas. They are not, as is often thought, confined to the shores of Ullswater in Cumbria or the River Dove in Farndale, Yorkshire. The wild daffodil grows in many locations throughout the Lake District with recordings stretching from Ullswater, Windermere, Grasmere, Kentmere, the Duddon Valley, Brigsteer in the Lyth Valley and many other locations throughout the National Park area and beyond. It is interesting to note the words of Rev. A. Rawson

M.A. of Windermere who on speaking at the 1890 RHS Daffodil Conference and Exhibition said "the common Pseudo-Narcissus grows wild in great abundance all around and is in fact a weed in some of the meadows".

Similarly the distribution of *N. pseudonarcissus* stretches throughout the vast area of the North York Moors National Park and is not just confined to the Dove Valley where conservation of the wild daffodils began in the 1950's. Indeed, we are very fortunate to still have these wonderful plants, as a major scheme to dam and flood the valley by the water authority was defeated in the early 1950's!

The distribution of *N. pseudonarcissus* throughout England is also much more widespread than we realised. Most country floras have recorded their presence in one form or another and obviously some of these have far greater areas of distribution than others. The main concentration being along the South coast and stretching up to the Midlands. It is also apparent from written and verbal testimony that these colonies of wild daffodils were far greater in size (area) in earlier years and that the biggest factor in their more recent decline has been the clearance of forested areas, coupled with the more intensive use of land for food production and fanning.

To highlight this, the area known as the 'Golden Triangle' and mentioned earlier, is still a major stronghold of the wild daffodil. The plant abounds in the many wooded areas and scrub meadows and even colonized the edges of the M50 spur motorway between junctions 3 and 4, where it can be easily seen in late March to mid April, almost threatening to recapture the land it once occupied. Even so, we hear from locals and read in the poetry and prose of 50-100 years ago how the fields and woods around were "carpeted everywhere with golden blooms" and "swathes of daffodils as far as the eye could see".

Indeed, the 'Daffodil Specials' of the 1920's-1950's were trains laid on by British Rail for the sole purpose of carrying the sightseers and flower pickers and their daffodil blooms from London, Birmingham and South Wales to these famous wild daffodil sites and back. Nowadays the picking of wild daffodils is prohibited and a number of special conservation areas have been set aside to allow the daffodils to grow naturally as they once used to in this area. There is also a 10 mile circular route entitled 'The Daffodil Way' that links up the main daffodil woods and fields and other public footpaths in the Kempley, Dymock and Newent area. This is well worth a visit in late March/April when the flowers are at their best.

Common or Local Names

One of the most interesting parts of my research into our native wild daffodil is the vast amount of 'local' or 'common' names they have been given over the years. To date I have found no less than 125 different names applied to daffodils and whilst all of these do not refer specifically to *N. pseudonarcissus*, the majority do. The more I research, or travel to different 'daffodil' locations, the more new names crop up. The following are but a few of the most interesting or thought provoking names:

Lilac Lily, Yellow Lily, Wort or Wyrth, Julians, Glens, Lent Cocks, Corn Flower, Bell Rose, Asphodel, Solomon's Lily, Gracy Day, Haverdrills, Giggary, Cowslip, Crow Foot, etc. etc.

These are but a few of the myriad of names applied to daffodils, there are many, many more. It is easy to see from just the few names above how easy it would be for the daffodil to be mistaken for one of a number of flowers by a similar name, or vice versa. It is at this point that may have led some earlier authors or anthologists to have mistakenly assumed that because the word 'daffodil' did not appear in print, or in the verses of early poets and writers, that the daffodil was not known in England before the 16th Century? More on this later.

Lumpers and Splitters

One of the criteria I was asked to touch on was whether I thought the English plants of *N. pseudonarcissus* were the same, or different from those that grow in France or Spain (and presumably other countries)?

Although there appears to be a botanical difference, given the eight separate varietal names of *N. pseudonarcissus* listed in the International Daffodil Register, I am of the opinion that there are similar examples of the same variety that grow in England, growing in France and Spain. In fact, I would have said that the photo on the back of the Daffodil Society's 2010 Journal was identical in growth, stature and appearance to that of our own wild daffodil. The photo in question being a colony of *N. pseudonarcissus* growing in France. To all intents and purposes, the photograph could have been taken in Brigsteer Woods in Cumbria, or Farnale, or Queens Wood near Kempey. Yes there may be some variation in their physiological appearance to a greater or lesser degree, but then this is true of many narcissus species. I have seen sufficient colonies of wild daffodils, and sufficient variation in those colonies, that I must come down on the side of the 'lumpers' when it comes to the naming of species. There are far too many separate names given to subs, varieties and forms of what is essentially a naturally variable plant. Even if you can scientifically differentiate between two 'forms' or 'varieties' using DNA analysis, this doesn't necessarily mean they are 'different'? After all, *Homo sapiens* are one species, but we vary quite a bit, don't we?

Origin of the Wild English Daffodil

The origin of the English, or more precisely British *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* (for it grows wild in several Welsh counties too) has always been a bone of contention since writing on the plant began. Even to the extent that one learned author/compiler of a most excellent anthology on daffodils practically devoted the whole volume to the disproving of the daffodil being a native plant of UK/Britain.

Unfortunately, having gone to the furthest extremes of academic research to back up his theory, the author 'shoots himself in the foot' in one short sentence towards the end of the book that destroys the credibility of his theory. However, what he lost in credibility is more than matched with the mine of information he compiled on the history and folklore of the plant. It is a truly marvellous anthology and though it is more historical than

botanical, it should be on every daffodil enthusiast's library shelf (Title: The Daffodil An Anthology by Owen Moon).

So what then is the origin of *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* in Britain? Many far more qualified and knowledgeable pundits than me have attempted to answer this question and whilst some have come down on the side of it being a native plant, others have declared it to be an alien or introduced species. The truth probably lies somewhere in between the two positions. This latter sentence being Parkinsonesque in composition!

There is little doubt that the word 'daffodil' is far less old than the plant itself is in this country, historic documentation suggesting the word 'daffodil' was first used or introduced in the 16th Century? However, the plant certainly pre-dates the word, whether an 'asphodel' or a similar derivative 'affodyl' or whether a totally different, more local or regional name was applied to the plant prior to this time? This would fit in with the many different names that daffodils have been given locally and regionally and would explain the omission of the word daffodil in the writings of poets and literary figures prior to 1600. There have been more than a few 'overseas incursions' to our shores by various nationalities, over a long period of history. The Romans; The Vikings; The Saxons; The Normans; The Spanish; The Flemish; The Dutch; take your pick. Any, or all of these, could have been responsible for the introduction of *N. pseudonarcissus*, and of course other *Narcissus* species, to our countryside?

We are practically certain that *N. poeticus*, *N. x biflorus* ('Primrose Peerless') and *N. polyanthos* (Sec. Tazettae), all of which grew in some quantity in this country at one time, were all introduced or alien plants. But was the same true of *N. pseudonarcissus* (The Lent Lily)?

The Romans conquered most of Europe and were great transporters of plants for their gardens. They are also known to have planted *Narcissus* in memory of loved ones or fallen comrades. So they are strong contenders/candidates as they also occupied France and the Iberian peninsula and would have very likely transported native plants from there around their Empire?

Later European invaders like the Saxons and the Normans could also have brought with them plants from mainland Europe, as could the Spanish, Flemish and Dutch connections of the Middle Ages. So there were plenty of opportunities for the introduction of the *N. pseudonarcissus* to Britain. However, if we take the theory that suggests the 'daffodil' or 'asphodel' had many other local and regional names, due to the influence of so many different cultures and languages prior to the 16th Century, then it is equally possible that the plants could have already been here, even before the Romans arrived?

In addition to this, the land mass we know as Britain has been shown to have travelled from a point below the Equator and broken away from the land mass we know as Europe, many thousands of years ago. It has also endured a number of 'Ice Ages' though not total envelopment I believe as the Southern part of the country remained habitable?

This 'connection' to the mainland European mass could well have seen our island acquire many examples of the flora, prior to separation and could explain the more densely populated distribution of *N. pseudonarcissus* in the South of England and, significantly,

not in Scotland. In fact, a similar separation to that of Africa from Europe, where Narcissus species can be found on both continents as a result of the separation?

I fear we will never know the answer to some of these questions, unless some hitherto undiscovered geological fact comes to light in the future. Regardless of that, there is little doubt that at the very least, *N. pseudonarcissus* has existed for well over 700 years in our green and pleasant land and that alien, or native, it reproduces and flourishes like a native when left undisturbed. But then, so does Canadian Pondweed, Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam, to name but a few!

I think the best way to describe the nativity of the English Lent Lily is to say "It has been English, for as long as the English have"! Just in case you think I am 'sitting on the fence' I should say that I am in total agreement with F W Burbidge, who in 1890, at the RHS Daffodil Conference and Exhibition, said "There can be but little doubt but that the Daffodil is a truly English wild flower and is, I believe, the only species really native to this country".