

A Conversation with Bill Pannill

Every conversation with a daffodil grower eventually gets around to this question: How did you start growing daffodils? Bill's reply was a little different. "I started growing daffodils almost as a joke. My wife missed the garden club meeting at which they offered a collection of eight daffodil bulbs for ten dollars. My sister was there and ordered them for my wife. When they arrived the chairman called to say to pick them up and bring the ten dollars. It was a bad day and my wife said that she didn't order the damn bulbs, was not going to pick them up, and was not going to pay the ten dollars. To keep peace in the family I picked them up, paid the ten dollars, and planted them in the back yard. My wife made sure that all my friends knew that I was growing 'buttercups.' The next year there was a small spring flower show in Martinsville. My friends asked if I planned to enter. I said, 'Of course,' not knowing what I was talking about. As luck would have it, six of the eight were in bloom. I cut them, put them in Coke bottles with their names attached, and entered the show. I won five blue ribbons and one red ribbon. Having always wanted to be great at something, I decided that growing and showing daffodils must be it.

He soon met Harry Tuggle, who was so happy to have someone else growing daffodils that he gave Bill wonderful bulbs (his increase), took Bill to ADS meetings (it was just getting started), and introduced Bill to Guy Wilson and Nell and Lionel Richardson. After meeting them, he started hybridizing a little. In 1960 he made "about four or five crosses." Later he met Murray Evans at a daffodil show in Santa Barbara. When Murray agreed to plant and grow his seeds in Oregon, Bill "became a whole hive of bees." He went to Oregon every April for twenty-four years to select seedlings and every July or August for twenty-two years to fish with Murray.

Bill says when he first started hybridizing, he made some pretty wild crosses. He says he thought that by crossing a white and red cup with a white and pink that maybe he'd get a little more intense red. He got absolutely nothing with several thousand seed. He got more of a washed out orange. He also found that certain flowers that grow very well don't make good parents. A good example of that was Festivity. He says he must have raised three or four thousand seed from Festivity in many different crosses and ended up with about two worth keeping. You'll find that in looking at the crosses that other people have made that there are some parents that are proven good parents. Easter Moon is a good example of that. He's had excellent luck with it. The point is if you are interested in starting hybridizing, do it with proven parents if you can. And take a few chances.

The hard thing for any hybridizer is to evaluate your seedlings. And of course the more seedlings you grow the easier it is to discard ones that are not better than what you started with. Of course that's the whole criteria for evaluating. As Bill says, "Did I get something as good as, well really as good as shouldn't be acceptable because you already had the mother and father, did I get something better than the mother and the father? If I did get something better, then that's worth keeping and growing on for awhile. If I didn't let's get rid of it now, so that it won't take up space and effort and I won't rationalize every year when I look at it and say, 'Well, this does look a little bit better,' and end up forgetting what the mother and father looked like and decide that this child is probably worth introducing. Now I'm not saying I'm not guilty of that. I think I am at times. And yet each year I think I get a little bit more harsh in my evaluation of them. And a little more self critical with them. Self critical with myself. Another thing, though, when you do evaluate, you might, and again this might take a little rationalizing or it might be rationalizing, consider blooming time. Sometimes I'll get a flower that is no better than the mother. It's as good as the mother, it looks like the mother, but it may bloom two weeks later or two weeks earlier than the mother or father. If you get a pink that will bloom two weeks later than all your other pinks, even though it's not any better, it's still a valuable flower. So you've got to use blooming time as part of your evaluation. I don't grow doubles very well; I have a lot of trouble getting them to bloom and not blast. Well, I recently named two doubles that grow well for me that are no better and not as good as some of Mrs. Richardson's doubles. But they do much better for me in my area, and they do OK in Oregon, so I know they will grow in those two extreme situations. So I'm saying that sometimes we wonder why people name flowers that look just like another one and maybe don't look quite as good as that one. Well, I will defend them by saying that very often it's because of that—that the bloom season or the way they grow for a particular area might make them a little more

worthwhile than just their general appearance might indicate.” A 50% success rate in seed set, would be an exceptional amount for him.

On a typical day in daffodil season in Virginia, Bill starts examining the blooms when there is enough light in order to cut blooms that may burn. The whites and others that require several days growing after they bloom are left as long as possible. He makes four or five passes during the day evaluating seedlings, making crosses, and cutting more blooms for shows. He hasn't used any form of protection from the sun or weather for the last twenty years.

In Oregon, when Murray Evans was alive, Bill spent hours in the fields with him looking at his seedlings and selecting those of his own to bring back to Virginia. It was usually so cold and wet that they had to frequently go inside for coffee to keep from freezing. During these breaks, a couple of hundred blooms were staged in Murray's dining/living room which were later photographed, evaluated, and used as a source for pollen.

Bill made most of his crosses in Virginia but some were made in Oregon. Most of the seed was sown in Oregon. All of the blooms that Bill exhibited were grown in Virginia.

When asked how he decides what to name, Bill replied that usually his introductions are seedlings that have done well for him under number in the shows. These had been good in Oregon where the original selection was made, and in Virginia, where the increase is growing. He says he has registered several garden type flowers that should not be on the show bench. These were the ones that the visitors loved. He still has several of these under number that he can't bring himself discard. In the beginning he registered several that he had seen bloom for only a couple of years. He says that was a mistake. He now waits six or seven years.

Over the years, Bill has registered and named almost 200 cultivars. Most hybridizers tend to specialize or to limit their activities to certain types or divisions of daffodils, but the Pannill registrations cover almost the complete range of types included in the Royal Horticultural Society's official Classification of Daffodils. It is difficult to think of a division or a color combination which is not graced by beautiful daffodils which have resulted from Bill's imaginative crosses. The exceptions would be Division 10 for bulbocodium hybrids, and Division 11, the split-corona daffodils, for which Bill eloquently and humorously claims an intense distaste! As his son said when he was a little boy, they're a “frig of nature.”

Pannill daffodils are widely grown by amateur enthusiasts and exhibitors in the United States and are becoming increasingly well-known overseas. Several varieties have been taken up by growers in Holland and when available in sufficient quantity are likely to appear in the major retail catalogs of the world. This potential for world-wide distribution must be a great satisfaction for any plant breeder.

Pannill varieties are consistently successful at daffodil shows. In 1999 shows in the U.S., seven Pannill cultivars figured in ADS awards seven or more times. They were 'Intrigue' 7 W-Y, which topped the list by being included in 26 ADS-award winning collections; 'Homestead' 2 W-W (18); 'New Penny' 3 Y-Y (17); 'Williamsburg' 2 W-W and 'River Queen' 2 W-W (10 each); and 'Rim Ride' 3 W-GYO and 'Chorus Line' 8 W-Y (7 each).

When asked which of the daffodils he bred is his favorite, he replies that it seems to change annually, “but I suppose my favorite is 'River Queen.' . . . My favorite show daffodil is 'Homestead,' and I almost didn't select it. The cultivar which I hybridized of which I am most proud is 'Intrigue.' I think it has dual value for show and garden.” Bill is not alone in his judgement of 'Intrigue.' It has been awarded the ADS Wister Award, and is now being grown on in Holland. His miniature 12 W-W, 'Toto,' received an AGM in Britain in 1997.

When asked about goals yet to be reached, Bill replied, “I am sure that anybody that has bloomed a daffodil from their own cross has hybridizing goals not reached. As I read the postings on the Daffnet I realize there are many other directions I should have taken, but hindsight is 20/20.”

Bill is an enthusiastic daffodil exhibitor, and in 1972 (remember, he made his first crosses in 1960) he won the coveted Gold Quinn Medal for a collection which consisted entirely of his own seedlings, the first person to do so. Included in that 24, still under number, were 'Central Park' 1 W-Y, 'Exalted' 2 O-R, 'Tahoe' 2 Y-R, 'Imprint' 2 W-Y, 'Homestead' 2 W-W, and 'New Penny' 3 Y-Y. The last two are still winning top prizes today, and 'Homestead' was named a Pannill Award Winner in 1998. His list of trophies and medals won at shows would fill several pages, and most all were won with Pannill-raised flowers.

If you've been lucky enough to attend a convention where Bill was a speaker, you know he often ended by playing his ukelele and singing, "Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way . . . but I'm doin' the best that I can." When it comes to breeding choice daffodils, Bill was certainly "doin' the best" that he could—and our gardens are the beneficiaries. What a debt of gratitude we owe all the daffodils breeders whose flowers grace our gardens each spring.

Mary Lou Gripshover