

Brian Duncan: 50 years of breeding daffodils

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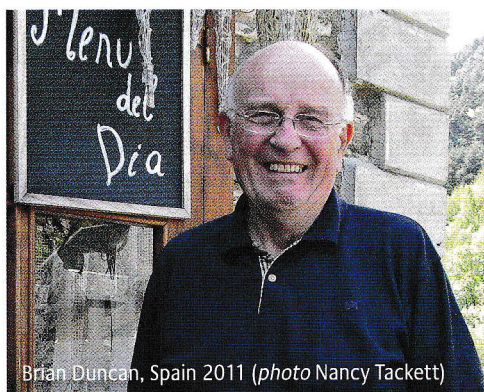
THE TITLE isn't entirely correct – actually it has been 53 years. Brian made his first cross in 1963 – to prove that he could – and after that there's been no stopping him.

Brian Duncan grew up in County Antrim, the seventh of eight children in a family of dairy farmers. After graduating from an agricultural college, his first job was with the Ministry of Agriculture as a dairy adviser. He took a mild interest in agricultural botany and plant recognition and was fascinated to learn that man could improve plants by crossbreeding.

Brian's exposure to daffodils in his youth was limited to 'Van Sion', which was planted in hundreds around the farm house, and to an 'odd' daffodil in the orchard that his mother said was Pheasant's Eye.¹

After his marriage in 1959, he had to find a house. Pride of ownership demanded a garden. Brian's ideas were limited to roses and daffodils—every garden had roses and daffodils! A college contemporary who had studied horticulture, Alan Smith, produced a landscape plan which included various shrubs and trees. In the autumn of 1960, Brian bought a collection of daffodils to place in pockets in the already planted shrub borders. When they bloomed the following spring, his 'wonders' were duly photographed and proudly presented to Alan Smith. As diplomatically as possible Mr Smith suggested that his flowers might not be quite the world-beaters he had imagined. He pointed out areas of improvement that hybridizers were seeking, and told him of Guy Wilson and his daffodils.

Brian just had to see some of these 'miracle' flowers, so in the autumn of 1962, he ordered a dozen bulbs at 2/6 each (12.5 pence post decimalization) from GL Wilson Ltd. When they flowered, he understood. He persuaded the



local horticultural society to introduce an element of competition into the daffodil display evening in May 1963, and to invite Tom Bloomer as judge and speaker/demonstrator. Mr Bloomer brought many of the latest and most beautiful daffodils to demonstrate grooming and staging and the technicalities of hybridization, and that put Brian firmly on the path to daffodil breeding. That night, he went away with a gift of several of Tom's flowers, and several days later made his first cross: 'Kilworth' 2W-YOO (JL Richardson pre-1937) × 'one of Tom's pink flowers'.

The aim of that first cross was to learn if he could manage the intricacies of producing seed. Only three or four seeds resulted, which were planted and germinated in a small clay pot. The baby bulblets had a tough job surviving the next couple of years, and none are recorded to have made it to blooming size. With proof that he could produce daffodil seedlings, an old fascination with plants and a new interest in propagation could be combined. And that, as they say, was that. Tom Bloomer was to become Brian's friend and mentor, and Brian would later say that Tom was like a second father to him.

As interest and enthusiasm grew, Brian began to study any available daffodil literature. Pedigrees and show reports were studied in detail. Visits ensued to Mrs Richardson at Prospect House, Tom Bloomer, WJ Dunlop and even the RHS London Daffodil Show. By the end of the 1964 flowering season, Brian had seen many of the best flowers available at the time. Mrs Richardson gave him some blooms to take home, including 'Rose Royale', 'Rosedew', 'Debutante', 'Salmon Trout', and 'Rose Caprice'. In that spring of 1964, his first 'serious' crosses were made and 17 out of 22 involved pink parents.

Brian's first show bench success with one of his seedlings came in 1971 at the Ballymena Show, when a pink seedling from that 'Rose Royale' pollen of 1964 won both the single- and the three-bloom classes for pinks. The seedling was later named 'Premiere' because of this first success, because it was his first pink to open each season, and because it was the first of his seedlings to be registered. Several years later, in 1973, he achieved another ambition: 'Lilac Charm' 6W-GPP won its class in London, and then again in 1974 and 1975.

Over the years, Brian has achieved the ambition of any serious daffodil hybridizer – winning Best Bloom in show in London with a seedling of his own, and winning the Engleheart Cup with twelve of them, the latter 20 times!

That fascination with pink daffodils never went away. Of nearly 750 cultivars of Brian's breeding listed in DaffSeek in 2016,² 295 have some pink in the corona. From the pollen from those first blooms from Mrs Richardson, Brian raised 'Premiere' (1973) and 'Modest Maiden' (1976). 'Pink Pageant' and 'Pink Paradise' followed in 1976, first in a long line of Duncan doubles of which 'Dorchester' was particularly successful. 'Fragrant Rose' 2W-GPP followed in 1978, winner of the ADS Wister Award as a garden plant in 2005, and itself figuring in the pedigrees of over 50 other daffodils. The 80s brought us 'Elizabeth Ann' and 'Kaydee', two smaller flowers in division 6. In the 90s, we got 'Notre Dame', which was a child of 'Fragrant Rose', and 'Cape Point'. The year 2005 brought



'Maria Pia'
(Brian Duncan 2006)
(photo Brian Duncan)



'Burt House'
(Brian Duncan 2009)
(photo Brian Duncan)

us 'Dena' 3W-WWP, perhaps the one with the deepest pink of all Brian's registrations, and 2009 brought us 'Burt House'.

Recognising that yellow and red bicoloured seedlings were essential for inclusion in the Engleheart Cup entry, Brian did not neglect them in his breeding programme. Satisfactory division 1 flowers with good orange or red colouring in their coronas were elusive. 'King's Grove' appeared in 1987; 'Chingah' and 'Feline Queen', both descendants of 'King's Grove', came in 2002; 'Lennymore' in division 2 came in 1983; 'Border Beauty' in 1992, 'Hot Affair' in 2006 and 'Firebright' in 2014 are all part of a long line of flowers with orange or red cups.

In division 3 with yellow petals, the older



'Firebright'
(Brian Duncan 2014)
(photo Brian Duncan)



'Doctor Hugh'
(Brian Duncan 1975) (photo Brian Duncan)

'Ulster Bank' (1978) is still worth growing. 'Burning Bush' came along in 1987, followed by 'Garden News' in 1990. 'Jake' debuted in 1997, and its child 'Video Kid' followed in 2013.

Breeding for flowers elsewhere in divisions 1-3 was not neglected. 'Goldfinger' 1YY (1983), with both an AGM and an AM, can still hold its own among newer cultivars; 'Gold Bond' and its child 'Golden Goal' still compete as 2Y-Ys; while 'Doctor Hugh' 3W-GOO (1975), awarded an AM(e) and an AGM, and one of its children, 'Cavalryman' 3W-R (1997), both have good colour and stand on strong stems. Daffodils have also been bred and introduced in almost all other divisions.

Brian admits he was a late starter in breeding split-coronas, sharing the opinion held by most

at the time that they were not worth a second look. But he had a sort of epiphany after David Sheppard of British Columbia gave him a bulb of his 'Last Chance'. Brian thought it was still a ragged flower, but it encouraged him to make a few crosses. His 'Diversity' (AM), 'Maria Pia' (PC), and 'Jodi' (Ralph B White Medal) have all won awards.

Brian says it's hard to say what his goals are, as the goals change as progress is made. In later years, he has been trying to breed division 1 daffodils with orange/red in the cup and either white or yellow in the perianth. 'Prime Target' in 2009 and 'Seville Orange' and 'Garden Beacon' in 2013 would seem to say he is well on the way to reaching the target. 'Hyperbole' 2W-R from pink breeding was registered in 2009.

In 2000 Brian made his first trip to Spain with John Blanchard to see *Narcissus* species in their native habitats. He realised that beauty is not only to be seen in show flowers, and that there were many species that hadn't been used in breeding. That also piqued his interest in miniatures, where he was surprised to see how few of the species had been widely used by hybridizers. He is working now on breeding better formed and better coloured miniatures with staying power. These days more of his crosses involve the miniature species. Since 2013 he has registered over 35 flowers as 'dwarf', and most of these came from using species parents.

The old adage says, behind every good man there's a good woman, and Betty Duncan has certainly been there to provide aid and encouragement all along the way. For keeping records, for help at shows, for encouragement to travel to see and find the best daffodils, she has been there.

Statistics can be boring, but they do serve to highlight the magnitude of Brian's work. From 1964–2002 he pollinated 7,980 pods and gathered 109,642 seeds. Similarly during 2003–2015, 167,246 seeds were harvested. Even allowing for the sale of some open-pollinated seed in recent years, this is a lot of seed to collect and plant. Furthermore, the seeds are just the start of all the hard work involved in growing them on for 4–6 years before the skilled job of selecting

worthwhile seedlings, gradually eliminating non-runners and then building up stocks of the few clones worth naming and introducing. Even in retirement at the end of 2015, Brian had about 1,200 pots of bulbs growing in his greenhouse and in external raised beds.

A keen supporter of RHS plant awards, Brian has regularly packed and carried large boxes of daffodils from Northern Ireland to England so that they can be considered for awards to flowering plants for exhibition. His flowers have received one First Class Certificate, 18 Awards of Merit and 11 Certificates of Preliminary Commendation from the RHS. Active support for the Wisley plant trials has also seen 21 daffodils raised by Brian receive the Award of Garden Merit.

Personal recognition has also come: the ADS Gold Medal (1986); the Peter Barr Memorial Cup (1987), Reginald Cory Memorial Cup (1999) and a Gold Veitch Memorial Medal (2001) from the RHS; an MBE in the Queen's New Year's Honours list (2000); and the John F. Ch. Dix Medal from the Royal General Bulbgrowers' Association of the Netherlands (2006). Brian staged gold-medal winning displays of cut daffodils at several RHS shows and won the Williams Memorial Medal for the best display at any RHS show through the year in 1978 and 1982.

In 1974, Brian and his business partner Clarke Campbell acquired Rathowen Daffodils, which was begun by Brian's mentor, Tom Bloomer. The partnership dissolved in 1989, with Brian continuing as Brian Duncan Daffodils until 2002 and Clarke continuing as Tyrone Daffodils. Since 2002, Duncan bulbs have been offered by Ringhaddy Daffodils.

It's hard to say which of the many Duncan daffodils will live on to commercial success, but several are being grown in the Netherlands and around the world and ten bulbs of 'Reggae' 6W-GPP can now be bought for £2.99 at garden centres in the United Kingdom. About 50 cultivars are grown in Cornwall for the cut-flower market, and many miniatures find their way to rock-garden enthusiasts.

I asked Brian why he still continues to make



crosses and sow so many seeds each year, and he said with a smile on his face, 'Cos I likes 'em! This can all be summed up as OCD. I guess I definitely qualify for that condition! The influences, inspiration and encouragement from friends, and the fun and camaraderie along the way all account for my sad, lovely, boring, wonderful, mad, passionate love for daffodils and daffodil people that has run for more than fifty years and will never dim as long as I am fit to continue.'

Mary Lou Griphover is a member of the RHS *Narcissus Classification Advisory Group* and a past president of *The American Daffodil Society*. She is a daffodil exhibitor, and also breeds daffodils as a hobby

NOTES

- 1 'Van Sion' is the old name for 'Telamonius Plenus'. Pheasants' Eye is a popular name for *Narcissus poeticus* var. *recurvus*.
- 2 Daffseek is the American Daffodil Society's daffodil database with photos, <https://daffseek.org/>

FOOTNOTE

See www.dafflibrary.org for the list of Brian's crosses made between 1964 and 2002. Click on Science, then Hybridizing, and scroll down the page. Also in the same place you'll find the Letter to Dr David Willis, first published in the Northern Ireland Daffodil Group Newsletter and later in the ADS Daffodil Journal, which sets out some of Brian's early thoughts about hybridizing. Information about seeds collected during 2003-2015 was supplied by Brian to the Editor.