

# YESTERDAY'S ISLAND



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## Feature Article

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### Daffodil Lady's Love Affair

by Sarah Teach

Did you know that over three million new islanders will be arriving on Nantucket this year? Not to fret, though; these fresh-faced beauties won't clog our traffic, litter on our land, or steal our spots at the beach. They may, however, steal the spotlight, with their faces brilliant and their auras magnificent. Who are all these shining newcomers? They are daffodils, of course, and they're arriving just in time for our Annual Daffodil Festival Weekend!

When I meet Festival veteran Mary Malavase, I know I am meeting someone with some major flower power. But her warm demeanor, reminiscent of her beloved daffodils, puts me immediately at ease. When I tentatively call her "The Daffodil Lady," she laughs and assures me that she has grown quite fond of the nickname. After all, Mary has been an integral part of our Festival since it wasn't much more than a bud in some ambitious minds. In particular, these were the minds of The Nantucket Garden Club and especially the late, great Jean MacAusland, who planted the idea of a flower show. The team of gardeners began by planting daffodils along Milestone Road in 1974, and they haven't stopped since. The Festival, often dubbed "Daffy" by attendees, has been growing like a weed (albeit a pretty one) for the past 37 years. This year marks the first time that our own Nantucket Daffodil Flower Show is actually approved by the American Daffodil Society. Mary says she absolutely views the show as Jean MacAusland's legacy. What a glorious way to be remembered!

As for Mary and daffodils, it was not love at first sight, but it is love nonetheless. The Daffodil Lady has a brazen spirit and is unafraid to offer the truth regarding her love affair with daffodils. She tells me that her interest was originally sparked by the very first flower show, and she began to volunteer at the event. Since then, she has attended every one of our annual shows! "Though it is competitive, there's more fun than work involved," she says with a grin. Mary's involvement was spurred on when her daughter Maureen started entering Nantucket's junior daffodil exhibitions. After that, the deal was sealed—Mary was a daffodil devotee!

It doesn't take long to realize that few could love daffodils the way Mary does. "I think they do take on a personality," Mary muses, revealing how deep her affection runs for these bright beauties. "As far as plants go, that is!" she adds with a laugh. One might think that this passion for daffodils carries over to all flowers, but Mary politely shakes her head. "Just daffodils," she says with a sincerity that proves her to be a faithful, one-flower kind of girl.

But why daffodils? Why not pansies or roses or even Nantucket's prized hydrangeas? Sometimes we don't know exactly why we fall in love; we just do. Mary thinks about it, though, and offers this, "After a long, dreary, chilly winter on Nantucket, daffodils arrive with happy faces to usher in a new spring!" She calls it "a wonderful awakening." Mary's reasons for loving daffodils are practical as well. "The deer and rabbits don't eat them," she states with frankness. "Daffodils just feel at home on Nantucket." We human residents may believe we are alone in our love for this island, but even daffodils can't seem to resist the Grey Lady's charm. Their roots relish the thorough irrigation provided by the sandy soil, and they thrive in the moderate climate. Mary makes sure to mention that daffodils are an inexpensive way to add beauty to your area of earth. "Just plant bulbs in the fall, then watch them bloom every spring!"

In fact, growing daffodils on Nantucket is so simple that The Nantucket Garden Club includes children in the festivities every year. In the fall, the Club helps local school children flex their green thumbs

by giving them their own daffodil bulbs to plant. It must be incredibly rewarding for the kids to be able to see their fall handiwork bloom months later!

When it comes to the many events of Daffodil Weekend, Mary tries not to play favorites. But with just a single mention of the flower show, she lights up with excitement. Mary claims that "Once you exhibit and win, you're hooked!" Each year, prizes are given out to contestants in each of the show's categories. Whether you are a novice grower or an expert exhibitor; there is a fitting category for you and your flowers. Though Mary herself has never dabbled in hybridizing (which she calls "a labor of love"), she is consistently impressed by the creative arrangements displayed in each year's competition. Mary has won quite a few blue ribbons for her own flowers, but her true feelings come out as she talks about making an impact on others' Daffy experiences. "I love mentoring people," she says. "The most rewarding aspect for me is having someone come up to me after the show beaming and saying, 'Look what I won!'" Mary's level of expertise makes her a valuable resource for greenhorn daffodil growers trying to identify and categorize their blooms.

Mary's down-to-earth manner may lead you to think she is just a local wonder. And in her humility, she won't offer up this information. However, I've learned that her influence reaches far beyond Nantucket, beyond even the New England region, and up to the national level. She was recently certified as an accredited daffodil flower show judge with the American Daffodil Society.

Mary taught me that Daffy is, above all, about enjoying life. I have a feeling that Jean MacAusland would agree with that. "Daffy is family and community coming together to celebrate spring," notes Mary. More than anything, let us remember to enjoy this "wonderful awakening" together. Happy springtime!