



Romancing the Daffodils

As seen in



Don't call him a horticulturist. David Burdick, of Dalton, Mass., is an old-fashioned "plantsman."

WRITTEN BY ASHLEY BRENON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILL WENDT

IN THE SNOW-PACKED PARKING LOT of Springside Greenhouse in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, David Burdick is pulling a laundry basket-sized galvanized tub of soil from the trunk of his car. On top rests a tipped-over stack of dark green plastic pots. "Oh, I'm probably going to play with a couple of cuttings later," he confesses.

The rickety greenhouse door swings open, and this bitter Sunday in March is suddenly transformed. The round, large-numbered thermometer on the wall reads seventy-four degrees, and the air is balmy and verdant. The fifty-three-year-old Burdick is one of more than eighty members who pay dues in exchange for a block of space here, enough room for a few dozen plants and three or four hanging baskets. (It's where he met his companion, Anne, an accountant, without whom, he says, he could never run his business.) Members meet once a week from September until May, as well as host garden speakers a few times each month.

In his allotted space, Burdick points out the charms of his specimens: for example, the fern that has a distinctive hairy root system. He lifts a bromeliad to his face and breathes in its particularly fragrant bloom. Into the rhythm of his horticultural soliloquy spill the plants' Latin and common names. Even beyond each species' characteristics, preferred soil type, and ideal amount of sun, he seems to know each of his plants personally. One of his bromeliads has produced yet another "pup" since he was last here, only a few days ago. That makes five now. Each will grow into a new plant. Spanish moss hangs lazily overhead. In spring, he'll throw



Garden Party: Like a good host, David Burdick seems to have an almost personal relationship with each of his plants.



Standing Proud: David Burdick (opposite) knows his daffodils inside and out.

it over the lower limbs of the spruce in his yard, because he likes the way it reflects the light as the sun goes down. To demonstrate, he pulls a part off and tosses it like tinsel over the spiky leaves of some plants in a hanging basket nearby.

Despite the exotic tropical plants he keeps in his greenhouse space, Burdick devotes most of his time to a New England favorite: the daffodil. Nearly ten years ago, he expanded his personal daffodil infatuation into a full-time job. Now he propagates specialty daffodils at Holiday Farm in Dalton, Massachusetts.

After leaving the thick air of the green-

house for the long tables and metal chairs of the greenhouse's chilly meeting room, Burdick starts to talk about the flowers that have become his livelihood. "All I have wanted to do is grow [daffodils] and get really interesting varieties into gardener's hands," he says.

When Burdick was a boy, his mother had planted daffodils at the roadside in front of their home in Woodbury, Connecticut. He can recall her running down the driveway in her bathrobe to keep drivers-by from stealing them. "I seem to be growing a lot of the plants she always liked: primroses, daffodils, and ferns. I like all the things that bloom



when it's cool and wet. I like being outside that time of year."

After graduating from the horticulture program at the University of Connecticut, Burdick worked at a wholesale nursery in Newtown, Connecticut, for two and a half years, before growing restless. He became a devoted fan of the Cobble Mountain Band, a seven-piece western-swing group based in the Berkshires. And after attending every performance within seventy-five miles of his home, he volunteered to be their roadie. "It was just a good mix of people, and I really liked the music," Burdick says.

He came to the Berkshires with a tent and stayed in the woods. His first night here, it was nineteen degrees outside. He had planned to live a work-free existence for six months. Instead, he was unemployed for just long enough to become eligible for the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, before being hired by the Berkshire Botanical Garden in Stockbridge, Massachusetts—then the Berkshire Garden Center—to install asphalt pathways as a part of President Carter's legislation to increase access for people with disabilities. It was there, at the Berkshire Botanical Garden,

that he received his first formal introduction to daffodils. Having been promoted to horticulturist, it became his responsibility to present an educational exhibit for the Lenox Garden Club's daffodil show.

The first thing that struck him, Burdick says, was their purity of color. "Every white daffodil I had seen up to that point was kind of ivory . . . and not particularly beautiful," he says, his normally casual tone slowing dramatically. "Refined beautiful forms and deep green eyes in the middle of them. Just gorgeous. Wow. I want to grow those. That's when I first started to fall in love with them."

He began investing in six-dollar bulbs, an extravagance for him, and growing them in his own yard. He took them to his first daffodil show in New Hampshire and ended up winning numerous awards. It wasn't until later that he realized that it had been an early year for everyone else in the country. By the time the show date



arrived, many exhibitors' entries had expired. The second year's weather was more typical, and the competition was fierce. "I got squashed," he admits. But by that time, he was hooked. He began pursuing daffodil propagation in earnest and moved his personal collection from his yard to Holiday Farm. After rigorous testing, he distributes a catalog of the best performing varieties to a growing number of daffodil enthusiasts.

"He's an independent entity, but very much a part of the farm's image," says Dicken Crane, part-owner and manager of the farm where Burdick grows and evaluates thousands of varieties, more than two hundred in the research beds alone. Burdick's goal is to identify the standout bulbs of the next century, especially those that grow well in New England gardens.

In order to make it onto Burdick's catalog list, a daffodil must meet two criteria: First, it must demonstrate the qualities of a good

garden plant. Only secondarily is it judged for its likelihood to win big at specialty daffodil shows. "Some of the varieties are released purely for exhibition," Burdick says. Often, they have spectacular color when they open, but it burns away in the sun. In other instances, a variety may have a beautiful double flower, but its head is too heavy for its stem. It's face-down in the mud after the

first heavy rain.

Loyce McKenzie, editor of the *American Daffodil Society* journal and longtime friend of Burdick, compares the longevity of many intricately bred varieties of daffodils to the short life spans of horses or dogs that are bred toward perfection. "Some of these fine hybrids don't survive," she says. Using a common British daffodil phrase to describe a





Morning Has Broken: David Burdick alone at Holiday Farm.

plant's capacity to thrive in gardens, Burdick makes sure each of his varieties is "a good doer," she says.

Unlike the farms that mass-produce bulbs for the average consumer, there are no machines involved in Burdick's operation. Planting in small beds with grass pathways decreases erosion, and because Burdick uses only organic compost and no pesticides, the water that *does* run off into the property's nearby stream is chemical-free. "[Holiday Farm's] goal is to engage the public in the benefits of protected, open space," says Crane. "He's managing the floodplain in a way that is compatible with that."

With an earth-friendly philosophy comes hard work. No machines mean that every bulb is hand-dug. Burdick estimates that he handles ten to twelve thousand bulbs a year, at least three times apiece. Harvesting alone requires he dig every day in July. "It's the romantic way of doing it," he chuckles. "But I love to dig them. When the plants are

healthy, the digging is good. There's nothing better than that."

In addition to working in the fields, writing catalog copy, attending shows, acting as the American Daffodil Society's Chairman of Intermediates—a group of about two hundred growers specializing in medium-size flowers—and speaking to groups, Burdick maintains his relationship with the Berkshire Botanical Garden by teaching a course on herbaceous plants each fall. His enthusiasm is contagious. "He is so passionate about what he does. I never thought about flowers before I took his class," says Printice Roberts-Toler, a retiree and former student who has since drafted a backyard plan of large perennial islands.

"I write horticulturist on my income tax return, but I am really more of a plantsman," Burdick says. He explains that a horticulturist cares for his plants with a precision that will enable each one to reach the perfection of its form. A horticulturist prunes at the

right time and only ever plants in just the right soil. By contrast, a plantsman doesn't strive for such perfection. A plantsman, purposely or through neglect, pushes the limits of what he thinks the plant can withstand naturally, and is amazed by the conditions in which the plant survives or flourishes. For him, this is the method for learning a plant's true disposition and making it a part of its life.

As Burdick disappears into the winter jungle of the greenhouse again to the satisfying, dirty-handed work of his cuttings, he delivers one last bit of wisdom. "If you're taking care of everything perfectly," he says, "you're not growing enough plants." **BL**

THE GOODS

Berkshire Botanical Garden
Routes 102 & 183
Stockbridge, Mass.
413.298.3926
www.berkshirebotanical.org

Daffodils and More
413.443.1581
www.daffodilsandmore.com

Holiday Farm
100 Holiday Cottage Rd.
Dalton, Mass.
413.684.0444
www.holidayfarm.com

Ashley Brenon, a writer and gardener living in Bennington, Vt., loves blueberries almost as much as David Burdick loves daffodils. This is her first article for Berkshire Living.