Daffodils trumpet spring's arrival

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVID HOBSON

Winter truly ends with the appearance of the first bright yellow daffodil. Daffodils evoke joy in spring – and maybe a tinge of regret that someone forgot to plant bulbs the previous fall.

Oh sure, there were snow drops as early as January, followed by crocuses and even an eager tulip, but for me, it takes a daffodil; they're much cheerier, nodding and waving a greeting. As Wordsworth described them in his classic poem, "tossing their heads in a sprightly dance, fluttering and dancing in the breeze."

Wordsworth claimed he saw 10,000 at a glance. This may be so, but I doubt it rivals the numbers planted at the East Texas ranch of the late Helen Lee. She used her Texas oil fortune to plant daffodils by the boxcar, millions of them, scattered over approximately eight hectares.

Closer to home, a few years ago a guerrilla gardener began planting daffodils on grassy banks along the Conestoga Parkway in Kitchener and Waterloo. Since it was technically illegal to trespass, he/she did this under cover of darkness, and did not reveal an identity, going by the name Unknown Gardener. To further brighten the day

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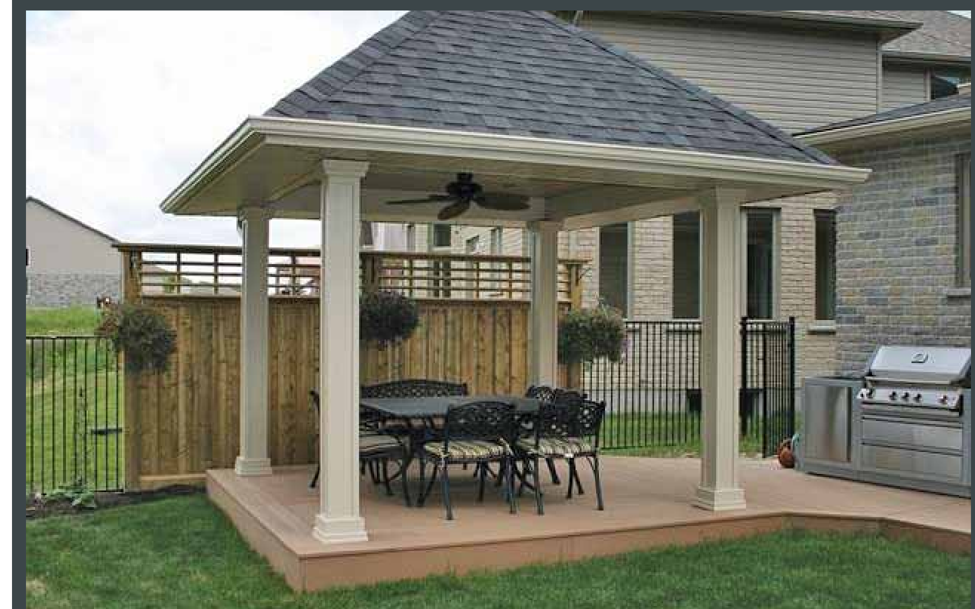

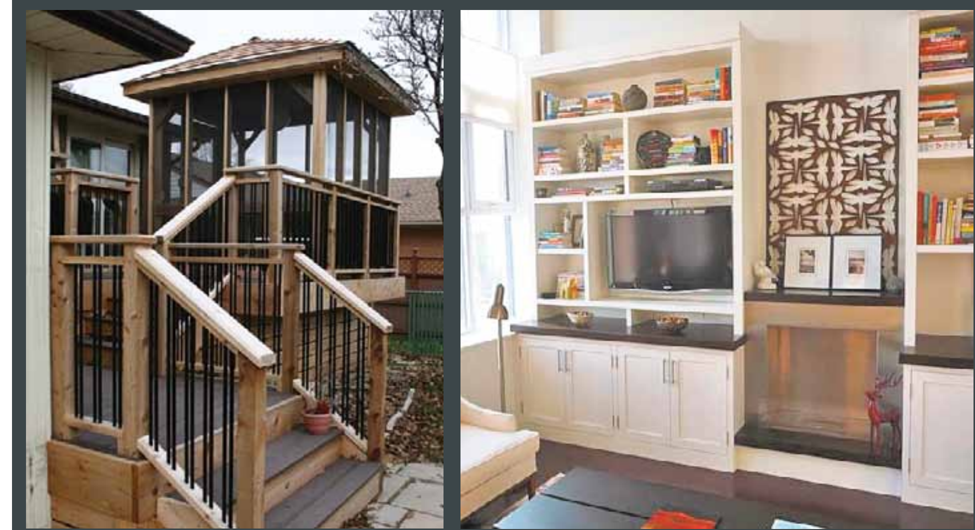

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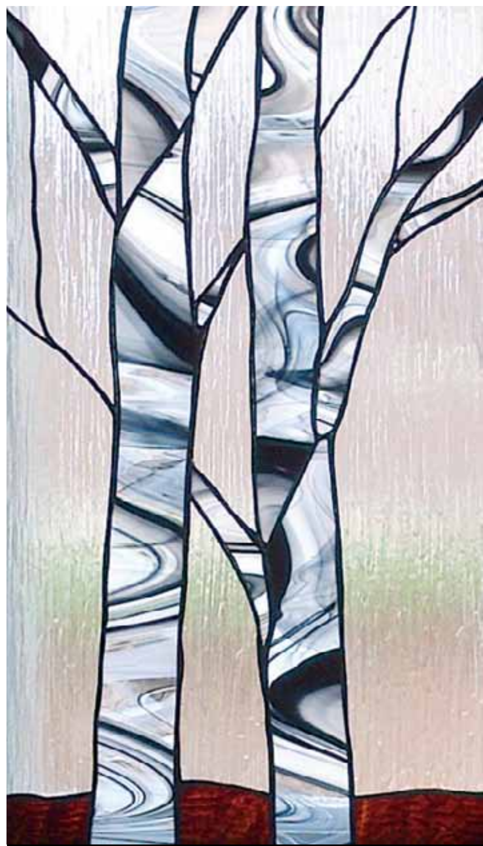

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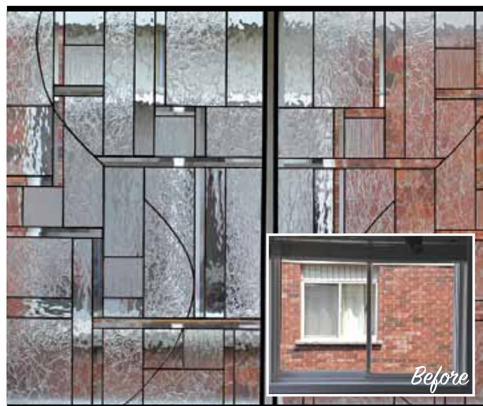

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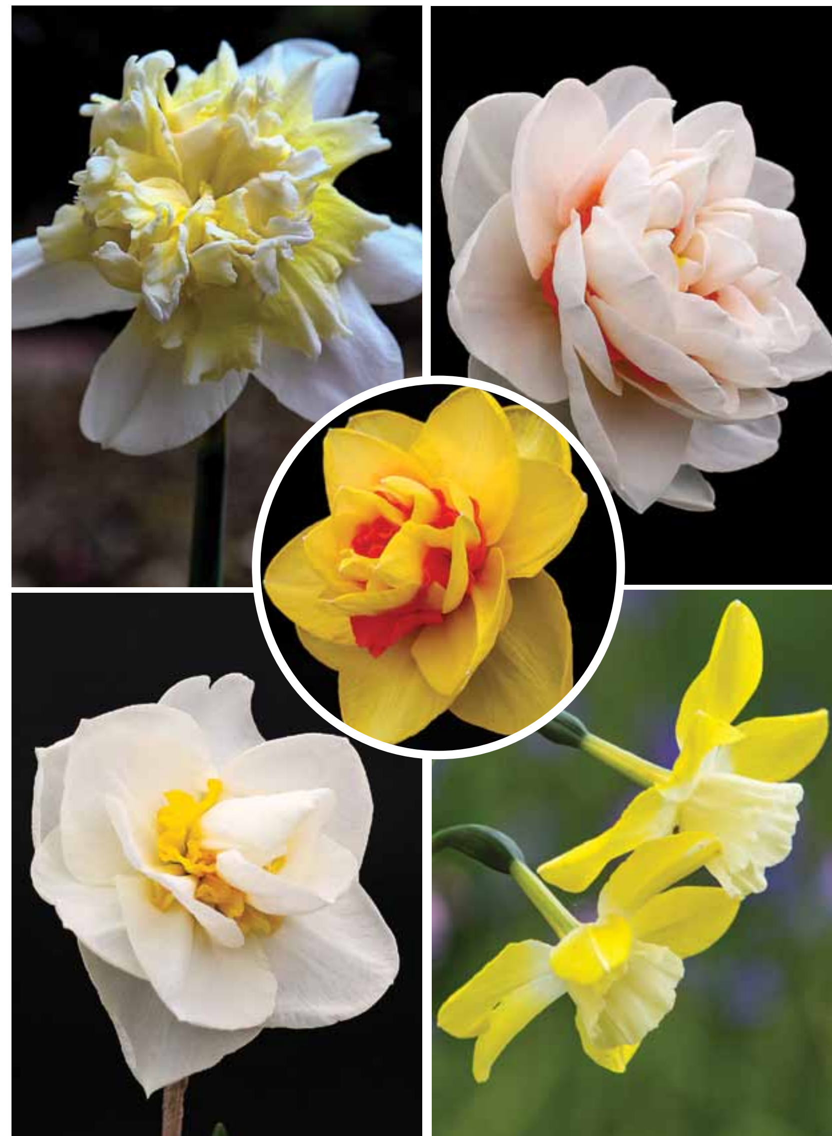

Examples from among the thousands of varieties of narcissus. Clockwise, from top left, Ice King, Replete, Avalon and Cheerfulness, with Tahiti in the centre.

of commuters, this gardener planted the bulbs in the form of happy faces that may still be seen today.

Happy face or random clump, daffodils will always prompt a smile.

In England as a child, I rode a bus to school that stopped each day beside a cottage with a hillside garden that merged into woodland at its upper end. Daffodils grew there in profusion. Each day I looked forward to seeing the springtime progression as they sprouted, flowered and then vanished, overtaken by taller grass.

Over the years, when the clump of yellow daffodils in my home garden appeared, I couldn't help recalling an image that's stayed in my head for half a lifetime. But after a recent springtime visit to that very spot in England, that image has been eased slightly by one suggesting maybe there can be too much of a good thing.

At some point over the (many) years, someone decided it would be a good idea to plant daffodils along roadsides throughout England. Some say this began in the dark days of postwar Britain, but I don't recall any particular abundance in my youth. Regardless of when and where it began, the idea spread.

It became a pastime for many. Town councils large and small joined in, some with planting schemes of their own, others donating thousands of bulbs to charitable organizations. The daffodils grew and spread like dandelions, snaking mile upon mile across the country.

The results were amazing — at first. But I soon began to picture them as yellow snowbanks, and I confess that after a couple of weeks driving the highways and byways of Northern England, even I was ready for a change of scene, or at least a change of colour.

Despite the popularity, so many were planted it's feared they're now becoming a problem for the country's native species of daffodils, the ones that inspired Wordsworth's poem and the same ones that even Shakespeare mentioned in "The Winter's Tale": "When daffodils begin to peer."

They're under threat now due to cross-pollination between the non-native species and the many hybrids, especially the larger, brightly coloured ones. The original, more delicate British species are becoming a rare sight in the wild. To counter this, heritage groups are undertaking mass planting campaigns using native species in historic gardens where they can be protected (the roadside battle is lost).

This over abundance isn't likely to be an issue in Canada because we have no native daffodils. I feel I should point out that the daffodil is not native to Britain, either. Known since antiquity, it's believed to have originated in North Africa and southwest Europe on the Iberian Peninsula. Somewhat isolated in Britain, the original introduction, perhaps brought by an early traveller or Roman invader, was able to naturalize undisturbed for centuries.

At some point it became the national

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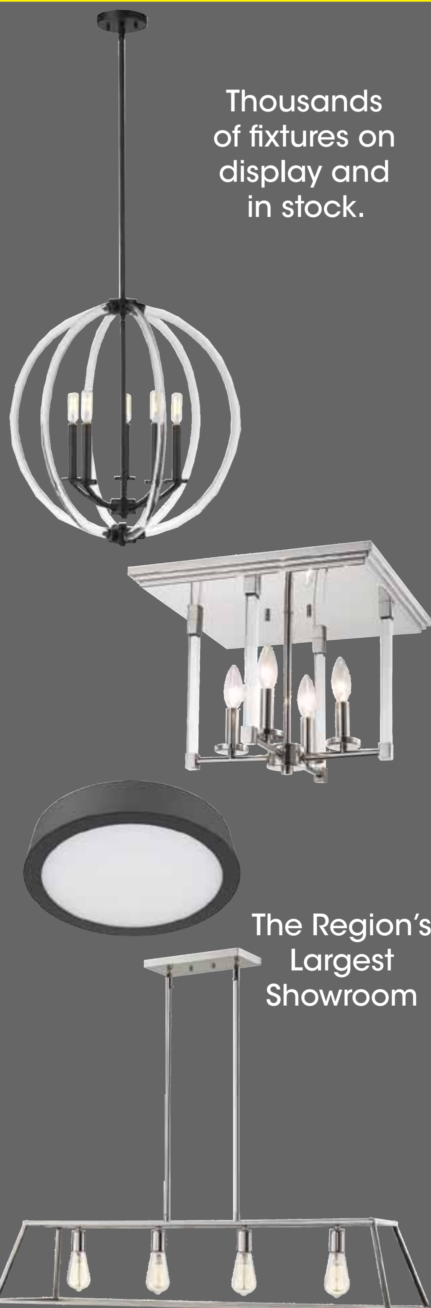

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flower and a symbol of Wales where it's worn on St David's Day each March 1, potentially supplanting the leek, which has long been the national symbol of Wales. This may be due to some innocent confusion because in the Welsh language, the name, Cenhinen, is almost the same for both plants.

In English, we call them daffodils, but are they? Is it daffodil or is it narcissus, the other oft used term, or are they different plants?

The simple answer is no; all daffodils are narcissus. Daffodil, or at one time daffadowndilly, has simply become the common, accepted name. The scientific name for the familiar, trumpet-like daffodil is Narcissus pseudonarcissus. Smaller daffodils, known as jonquils, are Narcissus jonquilla. Rather than a single bloom, jonquils tend to have clusters of fragrant flowers and dark green, tube-shaped leaves, like chives, unlike the seamed, sometimes triangular stems of daffodils.

The name, of course, is from the Greek myth of Narcissus who was turned into the flower of that name, and consequently, it's perceived as a symbol of vanity. In the East however, it's seen as a symbol of wealth and good fortune.

Another flower sometimes called a daffodil is the paperwhite, Narcissus papyraceus. It's typically grown in wintertime as a houseplant — if you can stand the intense fragrance. Unlike regular daffodils, it can't survive the winter outdoors.

Now that that's sorted, I'll continue to refer to the springtime garden plants as daffodils. Mention the name and predictably, most people will think of the familiar, bright yellow flower. But daffodils are available in all shapes, sizes and hues. They can be white or whitish, greenish, yellow of course, pink, and orange. Colours are then mixed and matched between the two parts of the flower head, the perianth (petals) and the corona (cup).

This is mainly thanks to the Netherlands, where daffodils have been cultivated as far back as the 16th century. Today, along with tulips and other bulbs, they've become the country's chief export.

In addition, growers and hobbyists everywhere have been breeding new strains. Depending on who is counting, there are as many as 200 daffodil species and subspecies and a further 25,000 registered cultivars (cultivated variety), including the more flamboyant strains that are causing the problem in Britain.

The best known and most popular variety is the King Alfred. He's the one said to have burnt the cakes, but there's no mention of him growing daffodils. The name was chosen by Englishman John Kendall, clearly a longtime monarchist.

It was introduced in 1899 when it was immediately awarded a First-Class Certificate by the Royal Horticultural Society, which likely had a bias towards regal names. (Kendall was no fool). Regardless, the society was impressed by the rich golden hue of its much larger blooms.

Sadly, Kendall died in 1890 and never saw the astonishing result of his humble breeding program. Successfully promoted and marketed by his sons, for the next 50 years King Alfred the daffodil ruled until production declined in the 1950s when newer, improved varieties were introduced.

Millions of King Alfreds are still being planted and remain available today. You may be watching them bloom in your garden right now, yet it's unlikely they're the original. I'm afraid the king is dead — though the name lives on.

So popular was the King Alfred, the name became synonymous with large yellow daffodils, much like Kleenex is commonly used as the name for any tissue.

Growers retained the name, and although limited numbers of the original are still produced, it's been gradually supplanted with superior varieties like Golden Harvest or Dutch Master. These and others are now sold as King Alfred "types," what you might call floral Elvis impersonators.

They're big and showy with a golden yellow trumpet, and thanks to Wordsworth and his host of golden daffodils, this is what most people will think of when they picture a daffodil. It represents a country, has Kingly connections, boosts the Dutch economy, was a poet's muse, and in recent years has become a symbol of hope for all affected by cancer. April is Daffodil Month when the Canadian Cancer Society will be launching their annual fundraising campaign, another reason to appreciate daffodils.

Despite my misgivings after being overwhelmed by the abundance growing along British roadsides, I still love daffodils, even prefer them to tulips, their spring rivals. There's something about the wild nature of them that's appealing.

Some varieties of tulips will naturalize, but daffs are masters at establishing communities that last for years, as seen by those yellow snowbanks I saw in England. And if there's one major advantage over tulips, squirrels won't dig up the bulbs and eat them, and nor should you. Despite having been used in traditional medicines since antiquity – and the bulbs do contain potentially useful compounds – they are poisonous if eaten, so don't confuse them with onions.

Now is the time to admire the beauties that will be appearing this spring. And it's the time to mark the calendar or set an alert as a reminder to plant lots come fall, hosts of them. Just go easy on the snowbanks.

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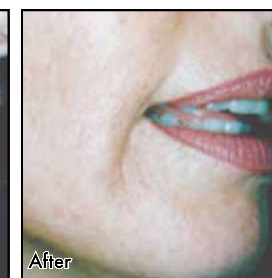

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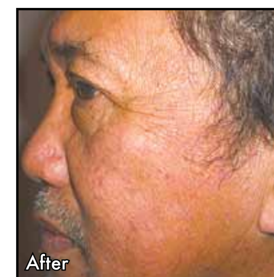

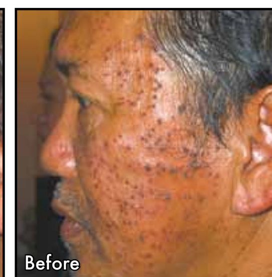

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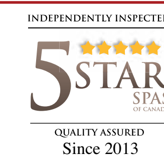

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