

Old Daffodils for Southern Gardens

by Scott Ogden

Scott and Lauren Ogden's latest book is *Plant-Driven Design: Creating Gardens that Honor Plants, Place and Spirit*. Mr. Ogden is also author of *Garden Bulbs for the South*. His website is www.plantdrivendesign.com.

Taking a weekend drive through the southern countryside in February or early March invariably brings travelers face to face with a charming and varied array of cluster-flowered narcissi,



trumpeting daffodils, and sweet-scented jonquils.

Bunched, starry white blossoms mix with sheets of tiny fragrant gold blooms and scatterings of luminous yellow flowers set against the green winter grasses.

The precocious blossoms seem to sprout like wildflowers from the old fields, spilling out from the neglected flowerbeds in older neighborhoods, and sometimes marking the boundaries of homesteads

whose buildings have collapsed in decay. Not the familiar hybrids of the modern Dutch trade, most of these colorful old flowers represent wild species and spontaneous forms cultivated since the time of John Parkinson, who in 1629 described these beloved bulbs in his famous *Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris: or A Garden of all sorts of pleasant flowers which our English ayre will permit to be nourished up*. Gratefully, the mild air of the South also seems to suit the old daffodils and they have spread widely from the pioneer gardens of the original colonies.

One of the old types still known to modern gardeners is the paperwhite, *Narcissus tazetta* var. *papyaceus*. Popular as a potted bulb for winter forcing, these make fine garden flowers in much of the South, sending out their musky perfume on the winter air. As garden blooms, these Mediterranean natives



begin growth in late fall, with flowers sometimes arriving as early as Thanksgiving and almost certainly by Christmas. Hard frost may damage the silvery gray, strap-like leaves, but the plants

prove hardy in most of the South. The clear white, starry blooms cluster atop 12-18" stems and look vaguely like sets of pearly espresso cups centered in "saucers" that are created by the six petals. Modern strains of paperwhite have been developed in Israel and make a good showing as pot plants, but these don't have the proven history of the older garden forms. Some old plantings seem to split and multiply at the expense of blooms. Yet, in a few fortunate gardens, there are variants, otherwise identical to modern forms that reliably send up blooms from every bulb no matter how crowded they become. These are true treasures.