

A Shaggy Daffodil Story

In our garden we have, all over the place and not planted by me, a short daffodil which flowers very early and has what I suppose would be described as “double” flowers. In reality they are usually just a shaggy mess – all the petals, with the exception of the outside ones, are split, doubled, malformed and generally rather untidy. Sometimes there are streaks of green. The ones in this picture are quite restrained!



We have also had this daffodil growing wild and happily in several other gardens, all attached to old houses. I am sure many of you have it too.

In trying to find out what variety it might be I came across a number of excited web posts by people who had come across this daffodil and thought they had found something new. In reality it is probably very old. Most people consider that it is Van Sion, first described in 1623. As an American paper says “when people ask us to identify a daffodil they’ve found in an old garden, a vacant lot, or way out in the middle of nowhere, it’s often ‘Van Sion’. In part this is because ‘Van Sion’ is all over the place. It’s been sold and passed-along for centuries, and it’s so exceptionally tough that it multiplies where many other daffodils can’t even survive.” Indeed it is very common in America.

You will be unlikely to find it in bulb catalogues, though it seems to have had a recent burst of popularity. In its first year it is quite a neat creature – the doubling is confined to the area inside the corolla. But after that it goes wild.

A 1907 catalogue says “It is planted by the millions annually”. But Haskins Garden Centre in 2017 describes it as a “lost” variety” and says “All the locations in which the Van Sion lost bulb variety have been found are connected to Capability Brown’s former sites” which is obviously wrong. So the mystery just deepens.

The confusion may be because this daffodil is a sport from the wild daffodil – indeed it is the same height and basic colour as the Tenby daffodils in my garden. This sport may have arisen on many occasions, meaning that there are subtle variations in the colours and shapes of the flowers depending where the sport arose. Indeed, my flowers have hardly any green in them. This means they are probably not Dwerydd daffodils, which is apparently a double daffodil originating in Wales. There is a good display of these in the Botanical gardens but again it is considered quite rare.



Anyway, I was pleased to see this daffodil growing and flowering on Kunashir, a Russian Island just north of Japan in 2014. It certainly gets about! Here is the picture I took at the time.

Meanwhile, enjoy your daffodils, whatever shape and size they are!

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