

March 27, 2015 Gardeners, Gardens, Horticulture, Plants, Scroll

A PUBLIC CALL FOR BACKHOUSE DAFFODILS

Plinth et al. Backhouse, Backhouse bulbs, Backhouse Heritage Daffodil, Backhouse Nursery, bulbs, Fife, Garden, Narcissus, Rossie Estate, Scotland



Through my mother's line I am a direct descendent of the Backhouse family, well known horticulturists and daffodil breeders. During the garden replanting and renovation work, my mother suggested it would be a good idea for a member of the family to collect together the remaining Backhouse-bred or introduced plants and bulbs before they are lost to time. My husband and I seem to have entered into a lifetime commitment to the Backhouse daffodils and plants which to date has been demanding and hard work but is certainly the loveliest, most uplifting and exciting project to be engaged in. We are sending this 'call out' to anyone who has or knows of a named Backhouse daffodil or plant which they would either photograph and send for our reference material or donate or sell one or two bulbs to the Backhouse Heritage Daffodil Collection in Fife, Scotland. If you are a commercial nursery or horticultural institution with a

shipping license. I can send a list of 'most wanted' cultivar names, which are also on our web site. We are in the process of seeking National Collection Status for the daffodils. We are not for profit for this is a true labour of love!



Rossie Estate, Narcissus 'Dick Wellband'

We are grateful for the invaluable help we have already received in the ongoing process of gathering together bulbs and images for identification of the Backhouse Daffodils from members of our family, RHS Library at Vincent Square London and the former Daffodil Registrar Sally Kington, RHS Wisley, members of the UK Daffodil Society, Dr David Willis, Jan Dalton The Daffodil Society Archivist, Kew Gardens Archive Library, the American Daffodil Society, and Lynn Batdorf.

Six years of hard but very enjoyable work has gone by in the restoration of the garden, now a beautiful collection of Backhouse Heritage Daffodil cultivars that greet visitors to The Backhouse Heritage Centre at Rossie Estate in Fife in Spring. They are preceded by *Galanthus* 'James Backhouse', *G.* 'Alison Hilary' and *G.* 'Mrs Backhouse Spectacles'. *Erica carnea* 'James Backhouse' flowers on Monastery walk beside the walled garden. Later in the year *Lavandula angustifolia* 'James Backhouse', *Correa backhouseana* or Backhouse Australian fuchsia along with tree ferns bred from spores from the original plant material shipped back to the UK by James Backhouse on the empty convict ships as well as other plants which were for sale at the Backhouse Nursery during their heyday in the 1800s, growing happily in the garden and glass house.



Narcissus 'Niveth'

Backhouse Daffodils changed daffodil breeding forever – William Backhouse, the first of the daffodil breeding dynasty, whose great achievement was breeding the stately *Narcissus* 'Emperor' and the bicoloured *N.* 'Empress' in 1865. These cultivars are two of the first triploid bulbs to be raised by a daffodil breeder; although Backhouse would not have known about the word chromosome, he had succeeded in increasing the chromosome count from diploid (14 chromosomes) to triploid (21 chromosomes). Modern daffodils with lineage of these two daffodils in their breeding still dominate divisions 1 and 2 and are still strongly present in division 3 of the RHS Daffodil Register. There has long been a debate about these two daffodils' parentage—indeed there is a letter from Copeland to Mrs. RO Backhouse asking her as to the parentage, however it is generally accepted that James Backhouse a well-known horticulturist and Williams first cousin's account in the Garden Magazine is correct – the parentage is believed to be *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* and *Narcissus bicolor*. However, William Backhouse's great legacy was to create the first known tetraploid cultivar *N.* 'Weardale Perfection'. At its peak 'Weardale Perfection' was the clear leader amongst daffodils for its huge bi-coloured flower more than five inches in diameter and its stem at least two-foot-tall, and was in the greatest demand at the time. Nearly all modern cultivars are tetraploid because they are healthy and strong and the possibilities of which the genes can sit on the chromosomes are vast and varied. 'Weardale Perfection' has long been superseded by its grandchildren and great grandchildren but such is the enduring appeal of *Narcissus* 'Weardale Perfection' and triploids *N.* 'Emperor' and *N.* 'Empress' still in commerce today. William's son RO Backhouse continued in the family tradition breeding hundreds of seedlings, perhaps his best known being *N.* 'Backhouses Giant' and one of his most lovely *N.* 'Lune de Miel', his wife Sarah Elizabeth Dodgson was a very able daffodil breeder, Engleheart himself a giant in the daffodil world wrote it was possible for people to discern in her work "the vast difference between talent and genius". Sarah achieved national

fame being awarded the Royal Horticultural Society's Barr Cup in 1916. She will always be remembered in her namesake daffodil 'Mrs EO Backhouse' the most widely known and grown pink daffodil in the last 90 years. William Ormston Backhouse continued the family tradition set by his grandfather. As a trained geneticist, he was well placed to understand the underlying science in the creation of the first Division 1 red-trumpet daffodil, he successfully achieved his goal registering in 1959 'Brer Fox' 1 Y-O.



We believe it's important to find and save these lovely flowers. Our search for the lost daffodil cultivars has involved driving literally thousands of miles at springtime, making maps of sites we have taken a few daffodils from (always with permission) and always leaving a substantial number in situ. On many occasions in sleet, rain and wind which has almost taken me off my feet! There are over 27,000 daffodil cultivars listed in The International Daffodil Register & Classified List, making identification of historic varieties uncommon in commerce today very difficult. We have been particularly lucky in this task for two reasons. Firstly, this is a family driven heritage project with a long-term plan for the preservation and conservation of the daffodils, to create a living library saving the genetic heritage and achievements of three generations of Backhouse daffodil raisers' ground breaking work for posterity. Happily, we have found people who want to help in this endeavour. Secondly the older generation in the families can still remember the names of some daffodils, what the flowers looked like and which gardens the plants might still be growing. On occasion, they still live in the same family homes and know which daffodils are growing in the garden. We have learnt a lot about the family during this process as often a great aunt or uncle tells us why the daffodil name is of personal family significance whether it is named after a relative or a special place, person or event or family achievement. When this aural history matches the images we have and the daffodil description in

the register it gives us added surety of the cultivar names, we have amassed many pictures with the help of the archives, organizations and people aforementioned from contemporary bulb catalogues or images from horticultural magazines, photographs taken by family and contemporaneous paintings which have proved invaluable in this task. Each year, the daffodil collection is growing. There is a buzz of excitement in the air as spring brings the blooms, and we hope to be able to find some of the missing daffodils or gain images so we can identify the nameless Backhouse daffodils.



Backhouse Narcissus

If you know of a named Backhouse Daffodil Cultivar in a collection and can spare a bulb or two for the Backhouse Collection of Daffodils or have a Backhouse Daffodil photo we would very much like to hear from you.

Donations of bulbs or visual material are commemorated, but we will also respect your wish to remain anonymous.

We are also able to purchase bulbs or Backhouse related items for this very important heritage project.

Please contact Caroline via the web site www.rofsie-estate.com if you would like to support the Backhouse Heritage Daffodil Collection in any way
