

Daffodils from the past

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Discovering a new plant is one of the great thrills for the plantsman or plantswoman. But sometimes rediscovering an old one is even more exciting.

At least it was for me in mid-October (2014) in the former homestead garden of Barrosa Station near the Stour River in the Ashburton Gorge district of Mid-Canterbury.

The 25-room homestead was damaged in the 2010 earthquake and has been unoccupied for three years since the 2000 ha-plus property, which had completed tenure review, was bought as a going concern and added to the Harmer family's Castleridge Station in an interesting example of a property completing a full circle. In the 19th century, when it was known as Clent Hills, Barrosa was a huge property that extended from the Stour River valley to the eastern shoreline of Lake Heron and took in the western flanks of the 2333-metre Mount Taylor. When the Clent Hills run was broken up early in the 20th century, the Clent Hills name was retained for the Mt Taylor portion and part of the Lake Heron basin. The remainder (which included the actual range still known as the Clent Hills) was renamed Barrosa. Castleridge, which includes part of the (actual) Clent Hills and the middle portion of the Lake Heron basin, was later subdivided from Barrosa and freeholded. It was sold to the Harmer family in 1992. My connection with the property is that my daughter is married to Paul Harmer, and they farm Castleridge jointly with Paul's parents. Castleridge now winters about 15,000 Merino ewes, 600 Angus breeding cows, and several hundred deer.

The site of the original Clent Hills run's homestead and farm buildings, including woolshed and shearers' quarters, was very close to the present Castleridge homestead.

This is relevant because when the Barrosa homestead was built the farm buildings were moved to their present site near the confluence of the Stour and the Ashburton River south branch, a journey of about 12 km. This must have been a massive and difficult undertaking with horses and drays because at that time there was no bridge over the Ashburton River where it bisects the Lake Heron basin. The only trace of the buildings at Castleridge today is an open space in the middle of the stand of pine, larch, spruce and Sierra redwood trees that still do a good job of sheltering the house from the north-westerly wind.

It's highly likely that the buildings were not the only items moved to the homestead at the Stour. The old double 'Van Sion' (Fig. 1) and the *incomparabilis* daffodils (Fig. 2), that have been quietly multiplying underneath the oak, birch, elm, and sycamore trees at Barrosa for a century or so, also made the trip.



Fig. 1 *Narcissus* 'Van Sion', the original double yellow heirloom daffodil recorded in 1629.

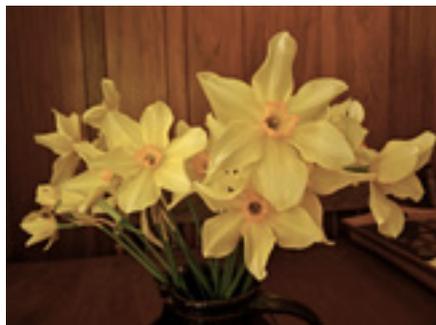


Fig. 2 *Narcissus* × *incomparabilis*, an historic daffodil first described in 1768.

In October, when for the first time, and for a variety of reasons mostly associated with the farming timetable, we were able to schedule a visit at daffodil time, their display was simply stunning.

Before Barrosa changed hands three years ago the previous owner, a bachelor, had been living in the huge homestead for about 30 years, during which time his horticultural activities were apparently largely confined to mowing the grass, trimming hedges, and occasionally grazing sheep under the trees to control tree suckers and brushweeds. This treatment obviously did the old daffodils no harm at all.

Underneath the trees, which had yet to fully leaf out, there were pools and swathes of *Narcissus* 'Van Sion' and *N. × incomparabilis*, the latter in a variety of colour combinations, both double and single. Scattered among them were rambling clumps of *Muscari armeniacum* (the grape hyacinth) with large spikes of flowers in a breath-taking deep blue. It was impossible to decide whether the intensity of the colour was genetic, a consequence of the soil, the altitude (about 450 m above sea level), the cooler climate, the perfect amount of light filtering through the old trees, or a combination of all or any of these factors. One thing is certain, however; the daffodils are genuine garden heirlooms whose history has been traced back to the 17th century.

Van Sion's double daffodil was first described in 1629 by a prominent apothecary and botanist of the day, John Parkinson.

Parkinson (1567–1650) spent his early life in Yorkshire, moved to London at the age of 14 to become an apprentice apothecary, and rose through the ranks to the position of apothecary to James I, and later botanist to Charles I. The first edition of his *Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris* was published in 1629 with

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the explanatory subtitle *A Garden of all sorts of pleasant flowers which our English ayre will permitt to be noursed up*.²

The story of *Narcissus* 'Van Sion', as told by Parkinson, is that a Flemish-born London gardener, Vincent Van Sion, had a small daffodil that he nursed along for many years before it bloomed. When, at last, a fat bud appeared and opened, it proved, to his delight, to be a double flower. Like a modern gardener, when his treasure increased Van Sion shared it with his friends. He did not name it but to Parkinson, who received some bulbs, it was "Van Sion's daffodil". However, some of the bulbs had gone to a florist³ named Wilmer and, after Van Sion's death, this man introduced the clone under his own name, apparently much to the annoyance of Parkinson. This name, "Wilmer's Double Daffodil" became widely used in England and still is mentioned occasionally.

Van Sion's daffodil resembles no wild species known at the time. A later botanist, Adrian Haworth (1767–1833), when unable to track down a parent, invented a single-flowered daffodil and called it *Narcissus telamonius*. He dubbed Van Sion's daffodil "*Narcissus telamonius plena*". Although pseudo-scientific names such as this are prohibited these days this is, curiously, still the official name of Van Sion's daffodil.

The amount of doubling of the corona in 'Van Sion' varies from partial to complete and the perianth varies from greenish-yellow to pale yellow or cream. The corona is funnel-shaped and smooth. The colour is vivid yellow, slightly paler at the base, and sometimes green at the apex. The cup is filled with petaloid and corona segments in alternate whorls. The petaloid segments are longer than the darker corona segments.

E. A. Bowles, in his *A Handbook of Narcissus* (1934), noted that the first appearance of Van Sion's

daffodil in England was chronicled by Parkinson. He added that Parkinson was annoyed that Wilmer "would needes appropriate it to himselfe, as if he were the first founder thereof, and call it by his own name Wilmer's Double Daffodil, which since hath so continued."

Haworth apparently provided a poor description of his imaginary *Narcissus telamonius*, which he regarded as the single form of two older double daffodils, but the name has been widely used. Bowles wrote: "As there is only Haworth's word for connecting it with the intangible *Telamonius*, it is better to call it by the garden name Van Sion, and to give honour to whom, according to Parkinson, honour is due."

Numerous synonyms for Van Sion's daffodil have been used over the centuries, including *Narcissus* 'Centifolio', 'Double Van Sion', 'Guernsey Cabbage Daffodil', 'Wilmer's Great Double Daffodil', 'Van Sion', 'Vincent Sion', 'Wilmer's Double Golden Daffodil', 'Wilmer's Great Double Daffodil', and 'Wilmot's Double Daffodil'.

You would be either very lucky or very surprised to find Vincent Van Sion's daffodil in the nursery trade today, but a generation or few back it was a standard component in every cottage garden and every estate garden too. Its survival in so many old and neglected gardens in the cooler parts of New Zealand is a tribute not only to its quality and longevity but to its lust for life.

Narcissus × incomparabilis Mill. (*Narcissus poeticus* L. × *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* L.) is a group of hybrids rather than a single clone. A mid-season daffodil with leaves to 35 cm and stem to 45 cm tall, it has a single flower on each stem, with spreading, pale yellow to white perianth segments, to 8 cm, and a small, deeper yellow corona, about half as long as the segments.

In many plants the corona is orange, or yellow with an orange rim. Its history in cultivation has been traced back to the 17th century, but it may well have been cultivated earlier in Europe, where it is thought to have originated as a wild plant.

The first botanical description of this narcissus was published by Philip Miller in the 1768 (8th) edition of his *Gardeners' Dictionary*⁴ as *Narcissus incomparabilis*: "Daffodil with one flower in a sheath, having a very short bell-shaped nectarium, and declining."

Miller wrote that he received "roots" of it from Spain and Portugal. However, it was known to Parkinson more than a century earlier, and featured as the "incomparable Daffodil" in his *Garden of Pleasant Flowers (Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris)*. It is now widely accepted that although it has been recorded elsewhere in Europe its original habitat was the Pyrenees and neighbouring areas. Double forms (traditionally known as "Butter and Eggs") are also known. The single form is more common, however, and to the plants person, probably more attractive. The perianth is often pale yellow or cream and the corona orange or yellow edged with orange, but forms with a white perianth and pale yellow corona are also seen. All the forms are very hardy.

Most of the double forms are yellow selfs, but one which grows at Barrosa and is sometimes seen in other old or abandoned New Zealand gardens has a pale yellow perianth and a mixture of cream and deep yellow segments in the corona. I first saw this 15 years ago at Lake Heron, surviving with other old daffodils (including 'Van Sion') along the fence-line after the wooden Mt Arrowsmith homestead, built in the 19th century, had been demolished and the site converted to pasture.

Miller was aware of the double forms, and wrote: "In its double state, it is well known to Gardeners, by the

² Full title: *Paradisi In Sole Paradisus Terrestris, Or A Garden of All Sorts of Pleasant Flowers which Our English Ayre Will Permitt to be Noursed Up: With A Kitchen Garden of All Manner of Herbes, Rootes, & Fruites, for Meate Or Sause Used with Us, and An Orchard of All Sorte of Fruitbearing Tresse an Shrubbes Fit for Our Land Together; With the Right Orderinge Planting & Preferuing of Them and Their Uses & Vertues Collected by John Parkinson Apothecary of London.*

³ The modern meaning of "florist" is a person who buys and sells flowers, but in Parkinson's time a florist also grew and sold plants and was the equivalent of a modern nurseryman.

⁴ Full title: *The Gardeners Dictionary: Containing the Best and Newest Methods of Cultivating and Improving the Kitchen, Fruit, Flower Garden, and Nursery; As Also for Performing the Practical Parts of Agriculture: Including the Management of Vineyards, with the Methods of Making and Preserving Wine, According to the Present Practice of the Most Skilful Vignerons in the Several Wine Countries in Europe, Together With Directions for Propagating and Improving, From Real Practice and Experience, All Sorts of Timber Trees. The Eighth Edition, Revised and Altered According to the Latest System of Biology; and Embellished with Several Copper Plates, Which Were not in Some Former Editions.*

name of Butter and Egg Narcissus, and of this there are two varieties, both of which produce large shewy flowers, the one with colours similar to what we have above described, which is the most common, the other with petals of a pale sulphur colour, almost white, and the nectary bright orange; this, which is one of the most ornamental of the whole tribe, is named in the Dutch catalogues, the 'Orange Phoenix'; its blossoms are so large as frequently to require supporting; its bulbs may be had of many of the Nurseries about London, and of those who, profiting by the supineness of our English Gardeners, import bulbs from abroad."

Hart's Central Otago Daffodil Fields

Discussion of historic daffodils in New Zealand should include mention of Hart's Black Horse Brewery and Daffodil Fields in Lawrence, Central Otago.

Ten hectares of land on the north side of the historic brewery was planted from 1895 with numerous daffodil selections, sourced from as far as the Netherlands, with no expense spared. It is thought that a million bulbs were planted, with the help of brewery workers.

These plantings were made through the vision of Benjamin Hart (1833–1917), named in the Daffodil Year Book of 1914 as one of the Daffodil Fathers of New Zealand,

and credited with instigating Daffodil Day in 1900.

Although only ruins remain of the brewery site, a Category 1 Historic Place, the daffodil fields endure. Set amongst a woodland garden that includes historic rhododendrons, the daffodils come into full bloom during the last week in September and remain at peak until mid-October, providing a spectacular display and visitor attraction.

The land remains in the ownership of the Hart family, and the Hart's Daffodil Charitable Trust was established to preserve, protect and promote the historic site and daffodil fields (www.hbhb.co.nz).



Hart's daffodil fields in Lawrence, Otago. Photo courtesy of Hart's Daffodil Charitable Trust.