

The Little Bulbs: Early Daffodils in the Elizabeth Lawrence Garden

Andrea Sprott, Charlotte, North Carolina

There is reason to celebrate. In my world, anything new that has to do with Elizabeth Lawrence and her Charlotte, North Carolina, garden is *always* reason to celebrate. In the six-plus years I have been garden curator at the Elizabeth Lawrence House & Garden, many a celebration has been had. One of those occurred before Christmas 2016, when one budded stem from a group of unidentified *Narcissus* emerged in a shady part of the garden. That doesn't sound like much over which to rejoice, until you consider that it was two years in the making.

In the spring of 2014, while preparing ground for the installation of some caladiums, I discovered a group of three thinly-foliaged but fat unidentified *Narcissus* bulbs at the end of my spade in a shady part of the garden. This discovery thrilled me considerably because, 1) my spade also "discovered" the aluminum stake to which Elizabeth Lawrence affixed plant identification tags (no tag attached, unfortunately); 2) further hand-digging uncovered a small piece of slate that may well have been an additional marker of sorts; and, 3) because all of this information combined told me fairly definitively these bulbs were original to Lawrence's garden. I immediately transplanted them close to their original spot, but in a bit more sun, in hopes they could eventually make enough energy to bloom one day.

Nearly two years later, in the third week of December 2016, while making my new bloom documentation/new plant assessment rounds in the garden, I noticed a bud emerging from the midst of 8-10" long glaucous foliage of one of the three mystery daffodils. Ever-curious and more than eager to update the "*Narcissus* unknown" database entry, I watched that one stem like a hawk. In the meantime, I scoured Lawrence's meticulously documented plant records. Unfortunately, she rarely noted exact locations of her plantings. Also, she grew over 450 different *Narcissus* in her Charlotte garden. My best bet, therefore, was to wait for a blossom to burst forth. I wouldn't know its true identity any other way.

Throughout the remainder of December and early January I watched that stem get taller and taller, but appeared no closer to opening. The weather forecast for the end of the first week in January was horrible - single digit lows and alleged snow. I waited until the very last minute of the very last day before the arctic blast moved in, before I cut that one stem and brought it inside. In a tiny glass vase on Elizabeth's studio windowsill, I left that tightly budded



Elizabeth Lawrence Paperwhite narcissus.

Photo by A. Sprott.

treasure, hoping against hope it was far enough along to open. It wasn't easy to leave it there Friday evening, knowing that if the forecast was right, I wouldn't be back to see it until sometime the following week. I could have taken it home with me, but that just didn't seem right. It needed to be there on the windowsill in her studio.

I cut one other early *Narcissus* flower that same afternoon, and placed it in the vase with the mystery daffodil. It was the very first bloom of *Narcissus* x 'Nylon', one I brought back to the garden a couple years ago - one Elizabeth wrote about in *The Little Bulbs*:

"I have had as many as four of the milk-white flowers from a single bulb. Their thin, fluted bowls are filled with a strange heady perfume like that of the Chinese sacred lily." (TLB, 79)

Although the temperatures that weekend were bitter cold (a low of 11°F) the snow did not quite make as big a show as they originally thought. I was back to work on Tuesday; I could not get there fast enough! What greeted me in Elizabeth's studio set my heart aflutter. Three of the mystery daffodil's six buds had opened - obviously a *Tazetta* daffodil (paperwhite) with purest crystalline white overlapping petals. 'Nylon', all buttery and delicate, had also opened beautifully. I brought the little vase into my office and starting snapping pictures. It was then I noticed the deliciously sweet fragrance; the sweetest, purest winter-sweet-like aroma I have ever smelled in a daffodil. And then I *knew* it was original to Elizabeth Lawrence's garden. Now comes the really fun part: searching those 460+ daffodil index cards for the proper identification of this incredible gem. Stay tuned. And now it's your turn to enter the tenterhooks waiting area for my next installment: sorting out plant identities using Elizabeth Lawrence's research!