







# Passing on the golden torch

David Carver is typical of the new generation of nursery owners, writes John Hoyland, determined to save historic collections and produce new hybrids

Photographs by Clive Nichols

**T**HE world of specialist plant nurseries, treasure troves of unusual varieties and expert advice, has always been a fragile one, but the past few years have seen these havens of expertise more threatened than ever before. A combination of rising costs, retirement and brutal competition from large-scale producers has resulted in the closure of many of our cherished plant centres. This makes for disheartening times for those of us who love being introduced to new plants by passionate nurserymen and who stand in awe of the immense knowledge of these expert growers and breeders. No garden centre or commercial producer can ever know as much about the plants they sell, nor can they match the diversity of plants produced by specialist growers.

Grim as the situation may often seem, a few rays of sunshine are beginning to break through: a new generation of nursery owners, led by young plant enthusiasts, is emerging. Often working on a small scale, sometimes selling only online or from micro-nurseries and usually prioritising sustainable growing practices, all are committed to offering plants overlooked by the mainstream trade.

Typical of this courageous new breed is David Carver. In Buckland Monachorum, west Devon, Mr Carver recently embarked →

**The miniature narcissus stock beds at David Carver's Buckland Cottage Garden in Buckland Monachorum, west Devon**



## Alec Grey daffodils

Alec Grey was one of the 20th century's most prolific breeders of daffodils, focusing mainly on miniature forms. Although some miniature daffodils existed before Grey began his work hybridising, it was his introductions that popularised the family and encouraged other breeders to explore the form. His first of hundreds of hybrids appeared in the 1930s and the last ones in the 1980s. Most of his introductions are available from specialist nurseries, but hybrids such as *Narcissus* 'Sun Disc', *N.* 'Jumble' and *N.* 'Minnow' continue to be mainstays of commercial bulb catalogues. His most famous daffodil, *N.* 'Tête à Tête', was introduced in 1949 and enthusiastically received by gardeners. It has gone on to be one of the world's most popular daffodils and accounts for more than 30% of Dutch bulb production.

Grey died aged 90 in 1986 and his collection first went to Walter Wragg before being entrusted to Christine Skelmersdale of Broadleigh Gardens, who nurtured Grey's plants for several decades and has now passed them to David Carver, thus ensuring their survival for a new generation.

on the adventure of running a bulb nursery. 'At school, I was not academically brilliant, but I got a job as a gardener at Endsleigh Hotel, Devon,' he explains. 'There, I discovered how much I loved plants and gardens. I knew that I wanted to work with plants.'

## 'The Alec Grey cultivars have now joined David Carver's personal collection of species daffodils'

A visit to South Africa opened his eyes to the extent of the world of bulbs and, once back home, he started propagating small quantities to exhibit at Alpine Garden Society shows and to sell to other exhibitors. 'At these shows, I began to hear rumours about bulb nurseries planning to close and realised that their stock might disappear.' Pitcairn Alpines in Perthshire, Scotland, had been producing many rare bulbs during the previous four decades and, when it closed in 2022, he bought as many of its gems as he could afford: trilliums and erythroniums, as well miniature bulbs.

'I began to realise,' says Mr Carver, 'that I should try to fill the gap left by these nurseries and, by the time Christine Skelmersdale



**Above:** Mr Carver pollinating narcissus. Working with species and cultivars—including the Alec Grey collection he inherited from Christine Skelmersdale of Broadleigh Gardens in Somerset—his focus is on miniature and intermediate flowering daffodils. **Facing page:** *Narcissus* 'Papa Snoz', which was registered in 2003 by Keira Bulbs, Australia

said that she was closing, I was ready to take the plunge.' Lady Skelmersdale had been a familiar face at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show since the early 1970s and her nursery, Broadleigh Gardens in Somerset, had a reputation for producing high-quality bulbs, often of species unavailable elsewhere.

Among the riches in her stock beds was a collection of miniature daffodils bred by the most important of daffodil breeders, Alec Grey. With the generous spirit typical of plant collectors, Lady Skelmersdale has placed responsibility for the collection into the safe hands of Mr Carver, ensuring that the plants will be available to future generations. The Grey cultivars have joined Mr Carver's personal collection

of species daffodils, and of his own hybrids, at Buckland Cottage Gardens, growing in polytunnels and raised beds that form part of a disused wholesale plant centre owned by his parents.

It is easy to understand the appeal of these miniature daffodils. Usually about 6in tall with dainty flowers an inch or so wide, they have a charm that their more muscular relatives do not. Often scented and sometimes with several flowers on a stem, they present a variety of flower shapes, some with swept-back petals, others with petals that spread out or reflex around the cup of the flower. All grow well in pots, where they can be enjoyed indoors or close to the house. The hooped-petticoat forms, *Narcissus bulbocodium*, and the →

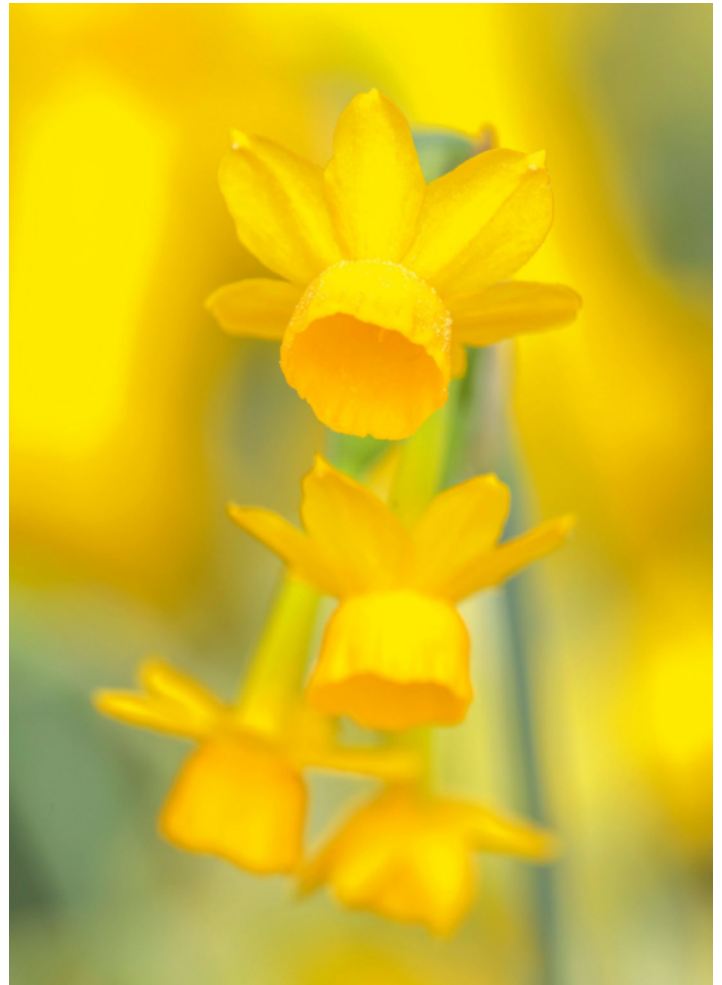












Facing page: A cross of *Narcissus alpestris* with *N. 'Nadder Moon'*. Above left: *N. bulbocodicum* 'Giselle', registered in England in 2014 by Anne Wright at Dryad Nursery, North Yorkshire. Above right: *N. scaberulus*, native to Portugal's Mondego Valley, enjoys gravelly soil

*N. cyclamineus* hybrids, will spread well in places with damp springs and are even tough enough to colonise grassy areas. Most other forms prefer a free-draining soil.

Last year, Mr Carver meticulously crossed his favourite daffodils to produce hundreds of seedlings, but he will have to wait three to five years to see if any of the resulting flowers are worthy of being promoted. He believes that there are myriad possibilities for creating new miniature daffodils with double flowers, split coronas and in uncommon colours.

Although Mr Carver's breeding programme extends beyond the miniature daffodils—to cyclamen and crocus, daphnes, species pelargoniums, gladioli and a collection of *Hyacinthella*, a genus rarely available in nurseries, recently accredited by Plant Heritage—it is the miniature daffodil that stands at the heart of his work. His ambitious intent is impressive and admirable: to produce new daffodil hybrids, to promote the species and to safeguard old collections and neglected varieties.

Mr Carver is enthusiastic about the future and he looks forward to a time when collecting miniature daffodils undergoes a 'snowdrop effect', when gardeners become as obsessed with daffodils as galanthophiles are with

## Other new nurseries

### Hooton's Walled Nursery, South Yorkshire

Father and son Glenn and Dean Charlton are restoring a former kitchen garden in Rotherham and producing ornamental grasses and unusual perennials. 01709 963735; [www.hootonswallednursery.co.uk](http://www.hootonswallednursery.co.uk)

### Wildegosse Nursery, Shropshire

Jack and Laura Willgoss originally set up their nursery to grow hardy perennial violas, but quickly expanded their range to include grasses and hardy perennials. 01584 841890; [www.wildegossenursery.co.uk](http://www.wildegossenursery.co.uk)

### Bright Green Fox, East Sussex

The closure of Marchants Hardy Plants, where she worked as the propagator, prompted nurserywoman Hannah Fox

to establish a 'micro-nursery', selling her plants at plant fairs and open gardens. Instagram @brightgreenfox


### Surreal Succulents, Cornwall

After selling succulents on eBay as a hobby, Daniel Michael took the plunge to establish a nursery focusing on the plants in the grounds of Tremenhore Sculpture Gardens, Penzance ('Through the garden gates', page 62). 07476 349545; [www.surrealsucculents.co.uk](http://www.surrealsucculents.co.uk)

### Botanico, Suffolk

Initially focusing on exotic plants, Will Purdom has now expanded the range he grows to encompass both very rare and common-or-garden species. All sales are made online. [www.thebotanico.com](http://www.thebotanico.com)

snowdrops, energetically seeking out the latest hybrids and cultivars. He aims to see the stars of his breeding programme being mass produced and available in every nursery and garden centre. His optimism and enthusiasm

are compelling and it is clear that in his hands, and those of his intrepid and enterprising colleagues, the future of the specialist nursery may well, after all, be secure.  [www.bucklandcottagegarden.co.uk](http://www.bucklandcottagegarden.co.uk)