

Narcissus romieuxii

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In the bleak months of January and February it is good to have something in flower to remind you of brighter times to come. I first encountered *Narcissus romieuxii* at Potterton and Martin's nursery in Lincolnshire many years ago, when I was astounded to see a cold frame full of these delightful miniature daffodils. Since then, I have bought numerous cultivars, raised them from seed, and grown them in my cold greenhouse where I can enjoy them unblemished by the winter weather.



Its wild habitat is exclusively from North Africa in the Middle Atlas, the High Atlas and the Rif regions and it seems to grow in both acid and limestone conditions with equal vigour. The flower is rather untypical of what we think of as a daffodil, being only about 150mm tall and consisting of a cone shaped corona (the trumpet) surrounded by six slender and short petals. The flower ranges in colour from pale straw to primrose yellow and, in some forms which I have seen, can be up to 50mm in diameter, but more normally about 35mm.

Narcissus romieuxii can be grown outdoors, but it is easily damaged by wind and marked by soil splashes, so growing it in a cold frame or unheated greenhouse is a better proposition. In the summer months, the bulbs don't mind being dried out and baked, and so as soon as the leaves dry off I clean up the pot and don't touch it again until I reawaken it by watering it in the second week of September which stimulates new growth. If the pot of bulbs has become congested, I knock them out of the pot in mid-August, separate them into similar sizes, and then re-pot the larger bulbs into a 9cm square pot, 9 bulbs to each pot (3 x 3), topped with grit. They are not too fussy about the type of compost, but I use a peat free product, with about 10% grit added to improve drainage. By late October shoots are appearing and the first flowers appear in early January. The smaller bulbs are just bunged *en masse* into a similar sized pot to grow on for a year or two. In either case the bulbs are set well down the pot.

During the flowering period I fiddle about with a small brush and transfer pollen around on to the stigma of other flowers - at that time of year there are few pollinators about, especially in a greenhouse! This ensures a good set of seed, which is ripe and ready for collection around mid-May. The seed is round, shiny and black, about the size of an *Aquilegia* seed and I have found it best to collect when the seed pod has gone a tawny brown colour, but has not yet split. I cut off the stem at soil level and place it, seed pod down, into a clean margarine tub and leave it for a few days to dry off. As it does so, the seed pod splits and spills the seed, without loss, into the tub. I then packet it in a small paper envelope, label it with the date, and store it in a cupboard in a cool north facing room.

I could sow it immediately, but May is a busy time on the nursery and it usually gets left until early November. For sowing I use a 9cm round pot and a compost mixture of 3 parts peat free, 2 parts John Innes No. 2, and 1 part 6mm grit. The mixture is put through a 6mm sieve to remove the odd lumps and a 12 month fertiliser added, in the form of mini-granules, according to the manufacturer's instructions. Now for the unusual bit - put a 10mm layer of grit in the bottom of the pot, fill the pot only to about

one third to one half full, sow the seed fairly generously and then top up with compost, and finally add a layer of grit to the surface. Sowing deeply does not inhibit germination, but does reduce the time till flowering by at least a year. Don't forget to label the pot with the name and date. Lightly water the pot, and then place it outdoors in an open situation and leave it for the wonder of germination to begin.

It will happily tolerate being frozen through the winter and will begin to germinate in January or February, whereupon I move the whole potful into the greenhouse to protect the emerging seedlings. I allow the potful to grow on all year and make sure that it doesn't dry out whilst it is still growing. Every second watering I add a tomato fertiliser at half strength to the watering can. Once the foliage has browned off in June or July, I leave the pots unwatered until mid-September. The seedlings are left in the original container for two growing seasons and then moved, without splitting, into a 1 litre square pot and grown on for a further year. Some of the bulbs often flower in this third year, and in the August of that year are knocked out of the pot and the larger bulbs potted up as flowering size specimens for the next year. Because of the cross pollination I induce, there is often variety in the seedlings and I select the best as single bulbs and grow them on individually to multiply as a clone.

And don't forget - the unique enjoyment and excitement of seeing your seedlings flower for the first time is reserved only to those who take the trouble to sow the seed and nurture the seedlings!