

## Chapter 6

# The Southwest and elsewhere

Bulbs have been grown for years in many areas of the U.K. and now daffodils in particular are being grown in substantial acreages in many counties, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, Kent, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Sussex and Somerset to name a few.

The south west has especially favourable climatic conditions. A frost free winter and an early spring gives the grower the advantage of early flowers of exceptional stem length under natural growth without expensive greenhouses and fuel costs. Recent technical innovations of advancing the flowering date by temperature treatment of the bulb before planting have further advanced the beginning of the flowering period so that outdoor daffodils may be picked in Cornwall from December onwards.

For many years small fields on the cliff-sides, sheltered from the Atlantic gales by the hills, by planted hedges and by stone walls were planted down with daffodils and left for picking for five or six years; in some cases these fields may still be seen nestling on the slopes around Mousehole. They must have been planted for twenty years with every bulb and flower carried to and from the field by hand which explains why they are left to grow out and look very patchy.

This climatic advantage gradually became exploited and larger plantings developed. Leading pioneers in Penzance were the Tomlin Brothers and a number of eastern growers were attracted to the area. Notable among these "foreigners" was F.B. Secrett of the Milford market garden family who built up a large stock of excellent daffodils based on Truro. Others followed later, Cave, Allan Clifton and Royce Scrimshaw and when Arthur Tomlin retired, his operation at Polgoon was taken over by Geests from Spalding. These growers introduced larger scale growing with an increasing degree of mechanical handling although complete mechanisation was hindered by the stony soil and the gradient of many fields where rainwater could on occasion wash both

bulbs and ridges down to the bottom of the valley. To the horticulturalist from other areas the soil appears difficult but rotational and fertility problems were helped by the willingness of dairy and beef farmers nearby to hire out fresh fields for the two years needed for daffodils to clean the land before resowing new leys, a helpful arrangement for both parties.

By the 1970's Cornwall was the second major bulb growing area in the country with about one thousand acres of daffodils. Traditionally, the flower crop was more important than dry bulb sales and this still is so. Husbandry methods have improved and the quantity of flowers harvested and marketed is increasing in volume so that the impact of the Cornish crop on the flower market grows in importance each year.

The dry bulb crop was of relatively less importance to the Cornish grower. His income depended mainly on his flower crop. However improved stocks and husbandry methods produced larger tonnages of saleable bulbs surplus to needs for replanting. Recent developments in the export market have created a demand for hardy English bulbs grown on soil which plant health inspectors can certify free of potato cyst eelworm. This certificate can readily be achieved in Cornwall and Cornish bulbs are now gaining a premium for export.

The advantage of early flowers is being developed with other "bulbous" crops. Anemones have long been grown in small plots in Devon and Cornwall. They are an ideal smallholder's crop requiring more labour than capital and the new improved strains of St. Piran should give this crop a boost.

Tulips are not so successful. The damp climate does not favour a good growth of the bulb and encourages fungal diseases. Unless flower prices are high, tulips do not appear to be economic and later flowers run into competition from eastern counties which quickly catch up with warmer spring and summer days.

Iris as a cut flower does respond to the Cornish climate and an increasing amount of Dutch iris is now being grown.

The Isles of Scilly have a special place in the bulb scene. The varieties Sol d'Or and Paper White grow well on the Isles and produce both bulbs and flowers. By a climatic quirk the conditions on the islands are able to give the correct dormancy and flower initiation requirements which are difficult to reproduce on the mainland. By following traditional methods of burning over the beds with straw and more recently experimenting with flame gun burners and polythene cover, excellent flowers of Sols can be picked and shipped the long journey by boat, road and rail to English markets from November onwards. These cheerful fragrant flowers usually bring good prices on the market in competition with



*Horse Ploughing out tulips in beds, 1956*

*Photo: Courtesy Lincs Free Press*

*Heading Tulips at Holbeach, 1958*

*Photo: O.A. Taylor & Sons Ltd.*



expensively forced bloom. They are a notable speciality of the Scillies and make an important contribution to the islands' economy.

Daffodil growing on the islands has had its ups and downs. The unique ability of the climate to produce early tazettas was recognised before 1890. Over intensive growing on the well sheltered fields brought problems of bulb rot and eelworm for which remedies were found. Growers are mainly small tenant farmers of the Duchy of Cornwall, short of capital investment and ruggedly independent although living in a classic situation for joint action, if only to organise transport on and off the islands.

Major A. Dorrien-Smith, the principal landlord of the 1920's, tried to organise the flower growers as a group to control diseases and promote better marketing.

There was a period of decline during the 1960's when market prices were poorer and some stocks deteriorated but the past ten years have brought improved techniques in husbandry and advancing flowering dates and the gradual introduction of virus free stocks of Sol d'Or has given the Scillies flower industry a boost for the next decade.

Wales has also had an interest in the daffodil as its national flower and a few growers have developed production in South Wales especially in the favoured early areas of Pembroke where growing conditions are similar to parts of South West Cornwall.

North of the border Scotland also produces daffodils and in size of production follows Cornwall with currently about 800 acres. The Scottish production is mainly for dry bulbs which are both exported and sold through the English bulb trade. The flower crop comes slightly later in the spring than the English flowers and often a useful demand occurs for yellow trumpets from Scotland after the English crop has blown. The acreage in Scotland is not expanding rapidly and the slightly later season which gives a possible market for bloom does not seem to affect the yield of bulbs but does put pressure on the growers to harvest, dry and prepare the dry bulb crop for market when early delivery is essential.

Since Scotland has built up a tradition and a lot of expertise in growing disease-free stocks of potatoes for seed the big question for Scottish growers is whether they can develop specially healthy stocks of daffodils and multiply them to supply planting material for commercial growers elsewhere. This is a possibility for the future but as yet the question must remain unanswered because the reinfection rate of narcissi is much slower than in potatoes. Where potato seed needs replacing every one or two years with new clean stock, daffodil stocks can, with careful rogueing, be maintained commercially satisfactory for thirty or forty years.