

Narcissus

Amaryllidaceae

[*Liliaceae*]

Narcissus is, for some authorities, the name of a beautiful boy in Greek legend. One version of the story tells how a nymph Echo fell in love with Narcissus shortly before she was deprived of the gift of speech and condemned to repeat only the last syllable of words she heard. Thus when Narcissus rejected her she was unable to declare her love and she died of a broken heart. As punishment for his treatment of her the gods made Narcissus dote on his own image and when eventually he died from languor he was transformed into a narcissus. For other authorities *Narcissus* is derived from Greek *narcao* (to be numb) with reference to its poisonous properties and its association with death and insanity - or from an ancient Persian word.

NARCISSUS is a bulbous perennial. Native to Europe and the Mediterranean, it has generally yellow or white flowers that have a ring of outer petals and a central trumpet of varying length.

It is also known collectively as *Nar-ges* (Persian), *Narkiz* (Arabic), and *Qu'saette* (Channel Islander-Guernsey); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of coldness, egotism, female ambition (double), 'one who gazes constantly at his own image', self-love, stupidity, and 'you love yourself too well'.

The name 'narcissus' was applied to many bulbous plants in the 17th Century if they had strap-shaped leaves.

Some authorities believe that the tazetta or bunch-flowered narcissus *Narcissus x medioluteus* is the oldest species. This was a funeral flower for the ancient Egyptians.

The Greeks, who well knew of the flower's poisonous properties, dedicated the narcissus to Hades, ruler of the Underworld, also known as Dis or Pluto, and to the three Fates (or Moerae) who shadowed the whole of man's life and wore wreaths of narcissus.

In Roman times ladies used the pulped bulb as an ingredient in face packs to whiten their skin, and during this same period the flowers were included in the scent mixtures with which they perfumed themselves and their surroundings, including even the walls of their homes.

For Christians the narcissus symbolizes the victory of divine love over sin, sacrifice over selfishness, and eternal life over death.

The narcissus is mentioned in the English tragi-comedy written by John Fletcher (1579-1625) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616), *Two Noble Kinsmen*. When Emilia learns that a garden flower is a narcissus she responds

That was a faire boy certaine, but a foole,
To love himselfe; were there not maides enough?

In the early 18th Century the English poet, John Gay (1685-1732) published a poem *The Narcissus*

.....
Through his pale veins green sap now gently flows,
And in a short-lived flower his beauty blows.
Let vain Narcissus warn each female breast,
That beauty's but a transient good at best;
Like flowers it withers with th'advancing year,

And age like winter robs the blooming fair.

Narcissi are depicted in the green and white national coat of arms of Pakistan.

Medicinally, extracted oil has been used by the Arabs as an aphrodisiac, and also as a remedy for baldness. English herbalists have recommended a distillation from the bulb for treating various disorders.

It is the birthday flower for 28th January and it is also associated with the month of December.

Warning – animals, humans.

Narcissus *Narcissus*

Authorities note that all species in this genus are potentially poisonous for humans and animals.

The whole plant (particularly the bulb) is poisonous. It can cause abdominal pain, dizziness, diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, convulsions, trembling and death.

It is poisonous for animals.

Warning – animals, humans.

Jonquil *Narcissus jonquilla*

The whole plant (particularly the bulb) is poisonous. It can cause abdominal pain, dizziness, diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, convulsions, trembling and death.

It is poisonous for animals.

Warning – animals, humans.

Campanella *Narcissus x odorus*

The whole plant (particularly the bulb) is poisonous. It can cause abdominal pain, dizziness, diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, convulsions, trembling and death.

It is poisonous for animals.

Warning – animals, humans.

Poet's narcissus *Narcissus poeticus*

The whole plant (particularly the bulb) is poisonous. It can cause abdominal pain, dizziness, diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, convulsions, trembling and death.

In a confined space the penetrating scent is said to have caused headaches and vomiting.

Some authorities believe that poet's narcissus is one of the more virulent species in the genus.

It is poisonous for animals.

Warning – animals, humans.

Daffodil *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*

The whole plant (particularly the bulb) is poisonous. It can cause abdominal pain, dizziness, diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, convulsions, trembling and death.

It is poisonous for animals.