

## The bells

### Wendy Akers

The first day I ever saw triandrus daffodils growing in the wild started in the bowels of Wembley Stadium. The Royal Horticultural Society had decided that year, 1993, to hold the daffodil show there rather than Westminster. I was judging with David Lloyd who was extremely unimpressed with the venue since the lighting was so bad. Instead of relaxing after judging I found James and we made a dash to Heathrow and a flight to Madrid, ending up in the twilight looking from our bedroom window at the hillside behind our hotel. Pale blobs among the trees were just visible in the semi-darkness.

#### *N. triandrus* subsp. *pallidulus*

When we finally climbed onto the hill, named on the map as Golondrina, it was an unforgettable sight. As we started to climb there were pale bulbocodium growing thickly in short grass. Further up through the trees and cistus bushes were scattered large rocks and a lavish flowering of rupicola. Finally, all around the summit stunted oak trees grew; in small groups as they had surrounded themselves with self-seeded juniors. This was where the triandrus grew.



Fig 1 *N. triandrus* subsp. *pallidulus* with *N. rupicola* on Golondrina

When we give talks about species daffodils the response from the audience to most slides is a murmur of pleasure. The exception is a picture of wild triandrus. This unfailingly brings an “ooh” of delight. Well, I felt exactly the same, enchanted by the sight of these frail bells growing among the roots of the oaks, as far as I could see on the hilltop. We have been back to Golondrina many times since that day, sometimes too early and found the buds just emerging, sometimes much later and found seed, along with all the early summer flowers in abundance, including a tall vigorous orchid. A special place.

Where the *rupicola* and triandrus met there were several hybrids, the name of this cross is *N. x rupidulus* and its effect is to give the *rupicola* more heads than its normal single one. In all marriages the children are assessed as to their appearance. Do they look more like their father or their mother? In this case they look like a taller *N. rupicola*, quite a pleasing graceful flower, with an extended cup. Thinking of all the variations in form of *rupicola* I have seen since that time I think it might be worth trying a mixture of the best form of *rupicola* (like the one Brian Duncan showed in London, a perfect little flower) and a many headed triandrus. Well, I can dream. The rest of this trip was to make us feel rather blasé about the triandrus. They grew everywhere in central Spain in the Guadarrama Mountains, sometimes sparsely, sometimes thickly, always the same type, *N. triandrus* subsp. *pallidulus*, a pale creamy colour with up to three heads being the norm.



Fig 2 *N. x rupidulus* on Golondrina

### **South west Spain, more triandrus offspring**

The following year expanded our triandrus sightings enormously. Again we started in Madrid but this time drove south, onto the barren plain below Toledo. It's impossible not to think of Don Quixote, the man of La Mancha, when driving through this sparsely populated area, the heat haze shimmers and daffodils begin to seem an illusion. The one that we eventually came upon, having left the

plain and found olive groves and vegetation at last, definitely seemed like a vision. It was growing out of the steep bank of an olive grove in a mixture of sand and stones. Deep yellow and with five heads we thought it was *Triandrus concolour*, which we had only read about and hadn't seen. Looking back at my notes eighteen years and many trips later I have changed my mind. I have seen many yellow triandrus concolour lately and they are so much paler in colour and less vigorous. Given that the next daffodils we saw were jonquils, *N. fernandesii*, I feel sure it was the hybrid between Triandrus and Jonquilla, *N. incurvicervicus*. These are so yellow and so sturdy and impressive and entirely desirable, I can't imagine why I haven't got a pot of them. I've just asked James that question and he says he *has* got a pot marked *incurvicervicus* which grows plenty of leaves but never flowers. He can't remember whether it's a collected form or a bulb he bought from John Gibson. When growing wild collected seed we always try to copy the conditions where they were found growing, reasoning that since they were growing well there we will try and copy those conditions in our garden or pot. In theory. How you could replicate a steep bank made of sand and stones or a wet shaly slope is not always obvious. So many wild daffodils grow in a crevice in a rock with very little discernible soil. I'm sure if you planted them like that in your garden they would be most unhappy, but having managed to insert themselves as a seed into a crack they do eventually manage to make a bulb and flower.

Later we found ourselves travelling north on the mighty A4 motorway at the point called the Desfiladero de Despenaperros (translation *the gorge of the slippery dogs*, a not very flattering reference to the Arabs during the conquest). This stunning and impressive defile on the motorway marks the division between the province of Castilla la Mancha and the south western province of Andalucía. If you turn off to the east towards the village of Aldeaquemada you find yourself climbing steeply around hairpins and soon start to see *Narcissus triandrus* subsp. *pallidulus* and *N. bulbocodium*. Up and up you go, catching glimpses of the motorway far below and the enormous lorries toiling along looking like toys. On a particularly high and desolate bend a sight greeted us that I have never forgotten. Growing in the stony edges of the road was the bright yellow jonquil *N. fernandesii* and just above it growing in the grass and bushes were more of the triandrus. We pulled off the road and walked back and then noticed below the road, growing in the most unlikely ground of shale and burned cistus, a host of the yellowest bells I had seen. The burning of the scrub had obviously created the ideal conditions making plenty of potash to feed the bulbs. I felt like Wordsworth, coming across such beauty. They were a cross between the jonquils and *N. triandrus* subsp. *pallidulus*, the hybrid *N. incur-*

*vicervicus*. The bees had obviously created the flowers carrying the pollen from the triandrus onto the jonquils and the resulting seed had happily spilled on down the mountain. We go back on that road just to see them again, whenever we are in the area.



Fig 3 *N. triandrus* subsp. *pallidulus* with *N. fernandesii* at Desfiladero de Despenaperros

Fig 4  
*N. fernandesii* on  
left with  
*N. incurvicervicus*  
in the centre at  
Desfiladero de  
Despenaperros





Fig 5

A double *N. triandrus* subsp. *pallidulus*  
at Desfiladero de Despenaperros

We hadn't got to the end of the delights of the Desfiladero though. As we continued on upwards, good flowerings of the very low growing *N. hedreanthus* var. *luteolentus* caused another stop and investigation. These hardly look like daffodils. They grow so near to the ground on short stems with all their style and stamens protruding from the cup, which



Fig 7

*N. triandrus* and the hybrid

One year we found a triandrus growing under a bush that had doubled inside the bell, a pretty, chunky looking flower.

Another year we hit a slightly mad fiesta; when we reached the village of Aldeaque-mada we found all the villagers dancing in the streets, and realised that all the men were dressed as women and the women as men.



Fig 6

*N. hedreanthus* var. *luteolentus*

gives them a sort of whiskery look. They grow along the wet edges of the trees that appear right at the top of the height as it flattens into a plateau. Again, they had hybridised with the triandrus. These triandrus were growing in a specific place, which we were to see many times. This was in a densely planted group of pines, at the other

side of the road, which made almost black shade beneath and a deep, deep litter of needles. They grew throughout the trees, all single headed, tiny bells. No other flowers could grow in such dense shade and the hybrids were all growing at the edge, in the light. In this case, the marriage had lifted the hedreanthus up on a long stem and given it a second head but had not bestowed much colour since the hedreanthus is such a pale yellow. It had passed on its deep yellow pollen however, slightly improving the result which was interesting rather than beautiful or graceful.



Fig 8  
A different form of the *hybrid*

Ten years were to pass before we found flowers of other hybrids of triandrus. In the years between we had looked in the right places but at the wrong time, a frustrating exercise. One site in particular near Puertollano, an industrial area in Castilla la Mancha had proved truly depressing on our first try. We had arrived there on a particularly grey and bleak day and searched fruitlessly for hours. There was nothing to be seen, apart from a large chemical works. The tantalising hybrids that we hoped to see remained unseen. When we eventually had the opportunity to visit the site again I almost didn't want to go, I had such bad memories of it. The day started badly, we hadn't stocked up on picnic supplies, thinking we would eat in a bar. Unfortunately we weren't aware that it was an important religious Sunday and shops and eating places were all closed. We arrived at the place, a picnic site off the road with tables among the trees alongside a wood. Wandering in the wood we first saw two of the parents of the hybrids, *N. bulbocodium* and *N. cantabricus*; yellow and white hoop petticoats respectively, with sprinklings of the ubiquitous *N. triandrus* subsp. *pallidulus* amongst them. No hybrids though. We fanned out, searching hard. James and Anne Smales had disappeared but Richard Smales was within shouting distance when I came upon two clumps of daffodils. Richard said later he thought I'd found a body in the grass, so strange was my voice when I called to him. I was trying not to sound hysterical with joy. These were the two hybrids, *N. x rozeiri* and *N. x litigiousus*. We often talk about hybrid vigour and these flowers certainly had plenty. They were fabulous and we feasted our eyes on them.

Hungry but elated we continued on our way, but were soon diverted by roadworks onto a tiny road going south. Here we stopped to eat what bits of dry



Fig 9 *N. x rozeiri* (left) and *N. x litigiosus* (right) at Puertollano



Fig 10  
The bicoloured hybrid between its  
two parents, *N. jonquilla minor* and  
*N. triandrus* subsp. *pallidulus*

bread and cheese we had in the car, sitting on some rocks by the side of the road. There were lots of jonquils growing around; *N. jonquilla minor*. Eventually it dawned on us that they also had hybridised with the triandrus, producing a lovely multi-headed flower that was a bicolour, the expanded yellow cup coming from the jonquil. The photograph shows the close proximity of the three flowers, the jonquil is not in focus but can be seen in the background with the graceful tall bicolour hybrid in the middle. A rather hungry but memorable day.

***N. triandrus* var. *concolor***

Last spring in Portugal we saw thousands of triandrus, mainly the yellow *N. triandrus* var. *concolor*, with some mixed populations of white and yellow and paler hybrids. These were always growing in a strange wet shaly soil. Some were on a high cliff above the town of Portalegre.

The best flowerings were along one side of the road that follows the River Tejo. The only similar shaly soil that I have seen is along the banks of a river in North Yorkshire in the Danby Forest; much loved by our children as a source of ammonites, as the river gradually cuts further into the bank and reveals these small fossils. I have always lazily assumed it must be from the Carboniferous era (roughly 300 million years ago) when a layer of ancient mosses and related plants were laid down as they became extinct due to climate change. Curious to think that we try to replicate this acid medium when attempting to grow triandrus by using the mosses available to us today, as peat. No wonder we struggle a bit to achieve the level of wetness and the level of drainage which obviously makes them so happy in Spain and Portugal.



Fig 11  
*N. triandrus* var. *concolor*  
Near the river Tejo



Fig 12  
3 and 4 headed  
*N. triandrus* var. *concolor*  
Near the river Tejo



### *N. triandrus* subsp. *triandrus*

The final group of triandrus that I must mention are the northern Spanish *N. triandrus* subsp. *triandrus*, the white bells and broader leaves distinguishing them from the whitish/creamy ones of central Spain. They can be seen from the top of mountains in the Picos de Europa right down to the ones I saw nodding at the sea in northern Galicia. The master of growing these must be Jim Pearce. In the days of his Spanish travels in the Picos he collected a bulb of triandrus which had five heads (they can have up to six heads). The next time we saw it was on the bench at the Daffodil Society show. His excellent growing skills were proved by the eight heads it now had, every inch a “best bloom”. This magnificent plant is still growing in his garden and much seed has been distributed to friends. His “partner in crime” Jan Dalton, a northern Spain expert showed a pot of a similar triandrus four years ago from a collected bulb. He’s just described the place he found it, at the bottom of a steep cliff in the Picos, growing in pure shale and running water. He was able to lift it easily, it wasn’t six inches down as most triandrus grow, the central bulb had several offsets and he planted it in soilless compost in a pot, and left it to get on with its life. It can be done.



*N. triandrus* subsp. *triandrus*  
photo Jan Dalton  
All other photos James Akers

There is a further and peculiarly Spanish sighting of triandrus. Phillip II of Spain (briefly married to Bloody Mary and therefore King of England) built himself a stupendous palace - El Escorial - outside Madrid. Walking around it many years ago, in a high gloomy corridor was a painting (16th century) of a nobleman. At his feet a clump of triandrus.

Looking at the “triandrus” class at the RHS Daffodil Show recently was interesting. Every entry was the same: ‘Ice Wings’, the one with three heads won. ‘Ice Wings’ is a striking flower, really icy white and is a cross made by Cyril Coleman in the fifties. One parent was *N. triandrus* and the other a division 2 W-PPY called ‘Ischia’ (The Brodie of Brodie). Striking as it is, do we really want to go in this direction? But that’s another article.