

## Rough winds do shake the darling buds of...February?

Wendy Akers

By the seventies I had five children and knew nothing of daffodils. I knew that James' father Jim, a top chrysanthemum exhibitor also showed daffodils and would travel on the train to Harrogate in the spring to show them in a tent in the Valley Gardens, but they never appeared in the house, so I had never seen them. By the early eighties Jim was getting into *his* early eighties and finding it hard to cope with the cold that strikes at sundown in Harrogate, so I offered to help him. Thus my introduction to the daffodil, the moss, the leaves, the name label and the lip pin. Somehow, as I embarked upon the steep learning curve of staging daffodils I managed to have a good look at the flowers and was astounded by their perfection and beauty. I well remember the first label I wrote was 'Arish Mell', which I heard as Irish Moll; James' father didn't suffer fools gladly so I almost got the sack at the outset. After a couple of years' apprenticeship he asked me whether I would like to grow some myself and gave me eight bulbs, divisions one to three. One of them was 'Inverpolly', one was 'Arkle' and one 'White Star', from which you might gather he leaned towards a good big trumpet. I always thought he was a bit suspicious of division threes as not being proper daffodils and his view of the "other divisions" was that they were "something for the ladies".

By the time I started exhibiting in the mid-eighties there were a few exhibitors showing tazettas and jonquils and other species based flowers and I finally came face to face with a cyclamineus, 'Lilac Charm'. Charm was the least of it, this was full blown *amour* and it just got worse. I fell in love with

'Trena', 'Charity May', 'Phalarope', 'Rapture', 'Carib' 'Tracey', 'Sheer Joy', I could go on and on, I adored them all. Was it the colours, the perky shape, the swept back petals that so enchanted me? Who can say, I just wanted them all.

The next stage in my obsession was discovering the heavenly joys of haring up and down mountains in Spain and Portugal, to see daffodils growing wild. Here I hit a snag. There was one huge gap in the list. We saw millions of *bulbocodium*, white, citron and butter gold, thin and fat. Showers of triandrus, jonquils spilling down hillsides, trumpet daffodils with every shape of corona; straight, curled, you would think I would be sated. But I wanted to see *cyclamineus* and couldn't. I refused to accept the received wisdom that they no longer existed in the wild. It seemed so unlikely, the most extensively hybridised species, available in practically every colour known to daffodils. Amazingly *cyclamineus* has been lost twice, the earliest illustration dates from 1608 but at some point after that they disappeared for about two hundred years and were thought not to exist. Then in 1885 Tait and Schmitz rediscovered them in Portugal. These Portuguese forms are the source of the bulbs we have today but the wild growing ones were said to be lost *again*. I hunted down all references to their habitat, pestered Sally Kington who showed me some tantalising amateur watercolours held by the Lindley Library at the RHS in Vincent Square. These had been painted in Victorian times from some Portuguese flowers, how could they have totally vanished again in that short time? So, in late March 1997, armed with every scrap of information we could gather we set off on a quest through northern Spain and Portugal to find them.

The two weeks we spent hunting were memorable, Galicia was a delight to explore, tiny villages where we ate freshly caught fish and drank *vinho verde* among meadows full of daffodils. The mountains were a scented revelation covered with flowering mimosa trees. How we searched, uphill and down dale. Into Portugal and the high range of the Estrela mountains, the snow just melting and sheets of *N. bulbocodium*, *N. asturiensis*, lots of interesting hybrids, *N. rupicola*, a tiny form which wasn't known to grow there. We even saw a Dartford Warbler in the Mondego Valley, perched on a thorn bush. We seemed to be on a roll, next up Porto and the flower we really wanted to find. We read in a Portuguese paper at the hotel that the previous day Manchester United fans had trashed a great deal of property after a losing game in Porto and anti-British feeling was running high. To avoid any trouble we decided to speak French when we were in public and set off. This was the start of the hottest, most frustrating day. The Douro river runs through Porto and then into the sea and could easily have been a perfect site for all kinds of wild flowers, back in the nineteenth century. In the late twentieth century we had difficulty finding the river,

never mind any banks. We had several named sites where the cyclamineus had grown in the past. Two of these were smaller tributaries which run into the Douro. As Porto developed into a successful sea port, second only to Lisbon in size, the buildings spread inland, consuming everything in their path and the sites are now buried under motorways, tower blocks and the usual urban sprawl we know so well. It quickly became obvious that there would be no flowers here, but by this time it was midday, we were stuck in a traffic jam in the middle of Porto with the temperature in the 90s and no idea how to get out. We passed the same old man, who was sitting outside his door, three times and were getting desperate. That was when I began to think the unthinkable, perhaps the cyclamineus really had gone. Did we ever get out of Porto? We did, eventually and after a bit of shouting. We stopped on the road to Coimbra and tottered into a little bar and ordered four bowls of strawberries from the chill cabinet. The proprietor came over and poured over them a generous amount of white port, he obviously thought that the four hot stressed-looking people sitting in his bar needed some restoration.

After that I decided to be content with the cyclamineus we did have, after all, we could buy bulbs and seed of the species and for a truly cyclamineus experience we could always visit the ones that have naturalised along the streams at Wisley and Savill Gardens. A few years passed and we entered the next millennium. In March 2002 we attended the Daffodil Society AGM and heard that a group had been to Galicia and seen and photographed cyclamineus growing wild and in profusion around Santiago de Compostela. Well, I fear that I gibbered in my excitement. Malcolm Bradbury had photographs of them and I stared at them in wonder, they really were found again, there they were, stream, brambles, scrubby grass and hundreds in a small patch of ground. I listened to the story of their discovery via a chance internet chat between Brian Duncan and Dr Juan Andres Varras, a Chilean gentleman who told Brian that he had recently seen them and was able to give precise instructions of their location. They had been to see them in February, *February*, not March. Everybody had looked in the right place at the wrong time. I had the immense pleasure the following year of standing in a field near the airport at Santiago and looking at the thousands growing there. The weather, it must be said, was atrociously wet and went some way to explaining why no one had taken a holiday in Galicia in February. Since then we have visited them almost every year and traced their spread over a huge area, so they are unlikely to disappear for a third time.

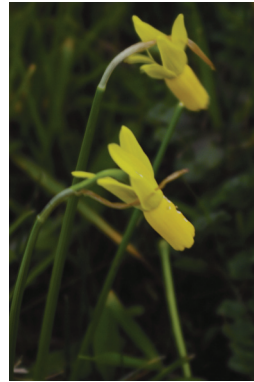
This year, 2010, the cyclamineus story came full circle for me. We were invited to join Brian Duncan and Sally Kington on a foray to Portugal and Galicia from 16 February and we flew to Santiago early that morning. We could-

n't resist visiting the cyclamineus near the airport before shooting off south to pick up Brian and Sally in Lisbon. The flowers were just coming out and I picked two just for the pleasure of looking at them in the car en route. They are a marvel, so slender and frail-looking, the trumpet and the swept back petals in the same plane remind me of nothing so much as a squid swimming along in the ocean. The exciting event I was looking forward to was a visit to a recently discovered site in central Portugal where cyclamineus had been found and a natural hybrid also; *Narcissus* × *caramulensis* (*N. bulbocodium* subsp. *bulbocodium* × *N. cyclamineus*). We travelled slowly north from Lisbon seeing an amazing flowering of *N. scaberulus*, *N. calcicola*, *N. triandrus* var. *concolor*, trillions of *N. bulbocodium*, obviously February is the right time to visit Portugal to see the species. Not, however, for the Estrela mountains which were snowed under. Eventually we arrived at the tiny village of Alcofra, in the Caramulo mountains, and met up with keen botanists Theo and Petra Sanders for the walk to see the flowers and hopefully the hybrid. I somehow wandered in the opposite direction, directed by a tiny old lady dressed all in black and leading two goats. When the others returned they hadn't found the hybrid on this occasion but looking at the *cyclamineus* it was the familiar one we have had in cultivation, sturdier looking than the Galician form and with a waisted and lobed cup, not the plain straight cup of the two flowers we had picked a few days before near the airport. Brian had a theory that there might be a transitional form in northern Portugal and that was our next goal as we travelled north.

Approaching Porto and looking for somewhere to spend the night brought back memories of the hot and frustrating trip in 1997 and I wondered what our last day in Portugal would bring. Next morning in the foyer of the hotel as we left, James noticed an internet connection and searched for "cyclamineus daffodils in Portugal". Immediately it came up with a picture of cyclamineus growing in a grassy field and a location: Porreros. It was a simple matter to enter the name into the satellite navigation system and drive there. It looked a most uninspiring little place, on the coast, a bit run down and surrounded by ploughed fields. We searched north, south, east and west but found nothing, so resorted to showing people in the street a flower from the day before and asking whether they could tell us where to find them. Eventually a man with a moustache nodded and indicated that we should follow him in our car. Off we set at a lively pace, fifteen minutes later as we entered yet another suburban motorway I suddenly realised exactly where we were being taken. I had just voiced my fears when we swept into a large garden centre where the man knew they sold pots of 'Tête à Tête' and had kindly guided us there. We thanked him for being so helpful and I thought Porto 2 Akers 0. This was the slightly farcical start to a long day and a hard search. To see *cyclamineus* you have to be able to

hear water flowing so we followed the river Lima eastwards, the road crossed it many times and at each bridge the routine was jump out, look at the banks for any sign of daffodils, jump back in, carry on to the next one. The only daffodils we saw all day were poking out of some really long scrubby grass and were *N. bulbocodium viriditubus* with very long stems. The light was almost gone and we knew this would be our last bridge. I was looking through binoculars and thought a tiny scrap of yellow might be something when Brian called everyone to his side of the bridge where he had seen many flowers. They were *cyclamineus* and we were still in Portugal so Brian could test his theory. I wish I had a photograph of Brian, Sally and James kneeling in that wet field, bottoms in the air, taking photographs in the dark. As we drove away the headlights lit up the road sign which said Porreros!

Our trip ended in Galicia again, we showed Brian and Sally the ones, the thousands, we had seen before, just inland from the sea at Lires near Finisterre and marvelled once again how many there were, how could we have thought they were lost, just because we hadn't seen them? Go and see them if you can, it's food for the soul, but go in February.



*Narcissus cyclamineus* from left to right,  
 Central Portugal, Northern Portugal, North-West Spain  
 showing how the corona shape progressively changes.  
 Another feature which I have not previously seen commented  
 upon is the very significant change in pedicel length. (photos James Akers)