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One Million Daffodils

For one April weekend on Nantucket, it seems that everyone becomes a flower child.

BY IAN ALDRICH

The man with the daffodil head wrap was impossible to ignore. There he sat, big smile, friendly wave, on a green bench on South Water Street, as streams of tourists filed past him on their way to Nantucket’s downtown center. Many of those strangers waved back; others stopped to chat; more than a few wanted a photo. In any other place, during any other weekend, he might have seemed too odd to approach, but on Nantucket, during the island’s annual Daffodil Festival, Eric McKechnie was a minor celebrity.

“Oh, look at that,” one woman chuckled to her husband as she reached for her iPhone. “Can I have a picture?”

McKechnie, whose face was reddening in the intense morning sun, beamed: “Sure!”

It was all a bit silly, but then that was sort of the point. Nantucket’s Daffodil Festival, which takes place on the last weekend of April, isn’t for the earnest or serious of mind. For an island just emerged from winter’s dark and isolation, the event packs a rightful springtime giddiness. It’s also the unofficial launch of a tourist season that runs all the way to December’s Christmas Stroll.

“It’s that time of year when we roll the cobblestone streets back out,” one longtime Nantucket resident told me.

Indeed. Stores reopen, lawnmowers fire up, and the general clog of window shoppers on Main Street that defines much of summer begins to take shape. And it all comes together beautifully, colorfully, maybe even a bit cartoonishly, on Daffodil Weekend, when all of Nantucket seemingly dresses in yellow. There are antique-car and dog parades, a hat pageant, a mile-long picnic, and the anchor event: the annual and tightly judged daffodil flower show.
And this being, well, a party, there are plenty of daffodil-inspired sights. Like: perfectly groomed poodles in perfectly tailored yellow outfits and grown adults in full-on Tyrolean outfits. There's the Daffodile Wrap (chicken and cilantro) at Cook's Café and the official weekend drink, the Daffotini, at most any bar.

And of course, there's Eric McKechnie, who said he's been wearing his daffodil headpiece here for 15 years. The husband of the woman who'd been taking pictures of him finally asked, "Is that thing comfortable?"

McKechnie didn't pause. "No," he said.

Daffodil Weekend was the brain-child of the late Jean MacAusland, a Nantucket summer resident and the former publisher of Gourmet magazine, who in 1974 landed on the idea of organizing an American Daffodil Society-sponsored flower show on the island. Her vision was wrapped around the ambitious plan to also plant one million daffodil bulbs throughout the island.

Both goals quickly came to fruition, and in 1978 the event spawned the antique-car parade. A few years later, Daffy Weekend was integrated into the lifeblood of the Nantucket community and became an anchor of the still-emerging shoulder season. Today, some 9,000 people descend on the island each year for the event, pumping important dollars into its restaurants, stores, and hotels.

My first inkling into just how popular the festival has become came three weeks before I actually arrived, when I tried to book my car for the
Friday before the event on the ferry from Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Every boat was booked for vehicle passage and had been for several weeks. Those in the know either traveled on Thursday, I learned, or made reservations months in advance. Traveling with my wife and our 2-year-old son, I secured passenger space on the ferry, then rented a car from Affordable Rentals, whose small office pretty much greets travelers getting off the boat. From there it was a short drive (or walk) to our home for the weekend, the White Elephant Hotel.

As a small part of a larger army of landing visitors, I found it curious to see the island suddenly absorb the onslaught of temporary residents. After four months of having the island to themselves, Nantucketers suddenly had to adjust to sharing the roads and once again waiting for walkers to cross the street. It was like driving in the first snow of the season. It required some relearning.

All of which raised the question: Just how much does the local community actually embrace Daffodil Weekend? Early Saturday morning, I set off to find out. It was pushing 6:00 when I walked into downtown, and as I neared the harbor, a buttery display lit up the sky as the sun rose over the harbor. Near the docks, two fishermen negotiated the day, while up on Main Street a lone policeman manned the barricades that had been erected for the morning’s parade.

Just near the harbor, four men, all in their sixties, milled about, clutching cups of coffee and throwing out the occasional laugh. “We meet up every morning and try and solve the world’s problems,” joked Wayne Viera, a native islander, who, like the others, calls Nantucket home. I figured that if there was any group that packed some resistance over the festival, this was it. Not so.

“We love it,” Viera responded, cutting me off before I could even
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March 12–16, Boston, MA
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DAFFODIL FESTIVAL
April 26–27, Meriden, CT
See more than 650,000 blooming daffodils at this carnival of amusement rides, local food, music, and fireworks held at Hubbard Park. Catch the Arts & Crafts sale and Daffodils on Parade. 203-630-4259; daffodilstest.com

DOGWOOD FESTIVAL
May 2–4, Fairfield, CT
Features concerts, an arts-and-crafts show, a plant and garden boutique, and beautiful, blooming dogwoods on the grounds of Greenfield Hill Congregational Church. 203-259-5596; greenfieldhillchurch.com

LILAC SUNDAY
May 11, Boston, MA
At the Arnold Arboretum, picnic amid some 380 lilac plants. Tours, live music, family activities, art installations, and food vendors are available dawn to dusk. 617-524-1718; arboretum.harvard.edu

NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND HOME, GARDEN & FLOWER SHOW
May 16–18, Fryeburg, ME
Meet home and garden exhibitors at the Fryeburg Fairgrounds. Buy your spring plantings; enjoy the cooking series, seminars, and tasty fair food. 800-359-2033; homegardenflowershow.com

WENTWORTH–COOLIDGE MANSION LILAC FESTIVAL
May 24, Portsmouth, NH
Celebrate the country’s oldest lilac trees at one of New Hampshire’s most cherished historic homes. 603-436-3040; wentworthcoolidge.org

CELEBRATION OF PEONIES
late May–early June,
Manchester, VT
Visit Hildene, the historic homestead of Robert Todd Lincoln, during the weeks that thousands of peonies are in bloom. Purchase heirloom plants and seeds to take home, too. 802-362-1788; hildene.org

NEWPORT FLOWER SHOW
June 27–29, Newport, RI
Visit the Rosecliff mansion for a weekend of garden exhibits, a lecture series, workshops, and vendors. This year’s theme is “Journey: Grand Vistas.” 401-847-1000; newportmansion.org

FIELDS OF LUPINE FESTIVAL
June (dates to be determined),
Sugar Hill, NH
The 21st annual Lupine Festival in the Franconia Notch area offers a vista of purple fields and pastures. Walk paths or take a wagon ride past the flowers; an open-air market on Main Street offers shopping, entertainment, and refreshments. Regionwide. 603-823-5661; franconianotch.org

Lupines bloom in a field near Sugar Hill, New Hampshire.
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AND FLOWER SHOW
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27, Mount Desert, ME
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NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND HOME, GARDEN & FLOWER SHOW
May 16-19, Fryeburg, ME
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WENTWORTH-COOLIDGE MANSION
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May 24, Portsmouth, NH
Celebrate the country’s oldest lilac trees at one of New Hampshire’s most cherished historic homes. 603-436-0540; wentworth-coolidge.org

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May 30-31, Manchester, VT
Visit Hildene, the historic homestead of Robert Todd Lincoln, during the weeks that thousands of peonies are in bloom. Purchase heirloom plants and seeds to take home. 802-962-1786; hildene.org

NEWPORT FLOWER SHOW
June 27-29, Newport, RI
Visit the Rosewood mansion for a weekend of garden exhibits, a lecture series, workshops, and vendors. This year’s theme is “Journey: Grand Victorias.” 401-647-1000; newportmansion.org

FIELDS OF LUPINE FESTIVAL
June (dates to be determined), Sugar Hill, NH
The 21st annual Lupine Festival in the Franconia Notch area offers a vista of purple fields and pastures. Walk paths or take a wagon ride past the flowers, an open-air market on Main Street offers shopping, entertainment, and refreshments. Region-wide. 603-823-5667; franconia.edu

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On and on they came, some from the island, others that had been exclusively shipped in for the weekend. As they were introduced, the event’s emcee and Chamber of Commerce president, Bill Ferrall, served up an inside joke or a snappy one-liner to each driver. When a 1968 Ferrari pulled up with a trio of women sharing the car with a male driver, Ferrall pointed his finger at the vehicle. “Is that one of the Goldfish girls in front?” he asked, garnering a round of chuckles.

A few hours later the party ratcheted up a few decibels out in Sconset, where the parade had concluded. Main Street became a rolling festival of food and music. Bands took up positions in the middle of the street. Some dancers struck up a performance, and when they finished, a group of women yelled out, “Encore! Encore! Encore!” And so they began again.

What quickly became obvious, however, was just how local this party was; the whole weekend actually. Anyone can join in, but at its very essence, Daffodil Weekend serves as a sort of reconnection among Nantucketers—summer residents and year-rounders alike. Up and down the Sconset party it was hard to miss greetings like “How was your winter?” and “Good to see you again.”

One of those happy to be back and seeing old friends was Susie Belcher, a Lakeville, Connecticut, resident who’s been coming to Nantucket since the 1970s and summering on the island the last 18 years. With her was her boyfriend, Mike Goulet, who upon experiencing his first Daffodil Weekend the year before, became determined to enter the antique-car parade. He bought a ’66 Pontiac GTO over the winter, sank $20,000 into restoring it, and in a buzzer-beater of a finish managed to get it running a few days before this year’s event. Together, the couple sat in beach chairs, sipping cocktails, and wearing matching 2013-rimmed glasses.
“This weekend is just more local and less touristy,” Belshe said. “And that makes it special. I guess not a lot of people think about coming to Nantucket in April. But for the rest of us, we get to see people we haven’t seen since September. Everyone is getting pumped for summer, which will be here before you know it.”

Strange as it may sound, what you won’t find during Daffodil Weekend on Nantucket are fields upon fields of daffodils. It’s more white than that: selected plantings along certain roadways or traffic islands; in small front yards and in window boxes. But another way, Jean MacAusland’s original vision of a million bulbs popping with color each spring still holds strong.

So does her flower show. That Sunday, the final day of Daffodil Weekend, my family and I headed out to Bartlett’s Farm, a seventh-generation family farm, which recently started hosting the event. More than 25,000 varieties of the daffodil exist, and a few hundred of them were showcased here, residing on long tables that filled out a big greenhouse.

Accepting donations at the front table was Julie Hender, a Boston architect who regularly competes in the event. This year, however, was the first in some years that she hadn’t entered a flower.

“I had 100 flowers in last year’s show, and this year just decided not to enter anything,” she said. “That meant I could love all my flowers, instead of spending hours picking through them, looking for blemishes or little things that make them less than perfect.”

But while relieved to be handling “door management,” Hender still cherished the show. “The first year I saw it, I just fell in love with it,” she said. “The judge paraded around with a bell, very proper and distinguished. He’d call out, ‘Ladies, ladies, three minutes. This mix was this mud dash, put their flowers in couldn’t stay away from the old-fashioned.’”

After getting our winners, my family car back in town, exacting, Main Street’s a stark contrast to the before. A scattering, out window-shopped relieved women who have the island back t
minutes. Three minutes.' And there was this mad dash by the women to put their flowers in their test tubes. I couldn't stay away from it. It was just so old-fashioned."

After getting our fill of blue-ribbon winners, my family and I parked our car back in town, and just started walking. Main Street's atmosphere was in stark contrast to the scene just 24 hours before. A scattering of people were out window-shopping, including two relieved women who were happy to have the island back to themselves, even if it was only for a few more weeks.  

"I like this," one of them said.  

"I know," her friend offered. "It's so quiet after yesterday."

Inside the stores, it was much the same. We meandered down to the harbor and explored the artwork at Pete's Fresh Fish Prints, then ducked into Brown Basket Gallery, Island Weaves, and Eye of the Needle. Back up on Main Street, we took advantage of the leather chairs upstairs at Mitchell's Book Corner, a downtown institution for 46 years; then grabbed an ice cream...
at the lunch counter of the Nantucket Pharmacy, just across the street.

That evening we headed west, into Madison, to catch the day’s final, coloreful act. At the end of a bumpy dirt road we parked our car in a small lot and watched the evening flicker away. We were the only ones in sight. Our own relief at having survived another winter had settled in, and, like the rest of the island, we would soon be gearing up for summer. But for now we seemingly had this beautiful little island to ourselves.

See more photos from Nantucket’s Daffodil Festival at: YankeeMagazine.com/more. This year’s Daffodil Festival is set for April 25–27. Details at: daffodilfestival.com

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FROM TOP: Blue-ribbon favorites and other winners at the Daffodil Flower Show at Bartlett’s Farm; David Billings II, a supporter of the show, with his dog, Blanche.