

# Sitting on our window sills, pots of gladsome daffodils

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There's a 100-year-old tale on Chongming Island about a farmer named Shi Gulang carrying a bouquet of his homegrown narcissus to visit relatives in downtown Shanghai.

On the way, he stopped to rest and was approached by a foreigner who was taken with the beauty of the flowers. The foreigner asked how much it would cost to buy them. Shi, who spoke no English, held up two fingers to indicate 0.20 yuan. The foreigner misunderstood and gave him 2 yuan, or 10 times the asking price.

True or not, the tale of the excited farmer returning home and starting a narcissus farm lies at the heart of a successful industry that is flourishing on the island today.

Narcissus, named for a hunter known for his beauty in Greek mythology, are a family of perennial spring flowers grown from bulbs. The most well-known are the daffodil and jonquil, which have distinctive trumpets. In Chinese, narcissus are known as *shuixian*, or "water fairy."

The flowers typically bloom around the Chinese New Year, or Spring Festival, which falls on February 1 this year. They are cheerful reminder that the worst of winter may be past and have long been a symbol of reunion and purity in the Chinese culture.

Flower markets in Shanghai fill with cut and potted narcissus in the run-up to the Lunar New Year. One of the most common varieties is the paperwhites, which are fragrant and easily grown in indoor pots with just some water and pebbles.

The flowers no doubt come from Chongming Island, one of the two major cultivation sites in China. The narcissus grown there are famous for plentiful buds, large petals and a sweet floral fragrance.

But let us return to the Shi family who are credited with starting the modern industry. Narcissus growing has remained in the family down the generations, with Shi Kesong and his son Shi Hao carrying on the tradition today.

The family are the only survivors of the once four great flower-growing families in Shanghai. The other three were the Zhao family, which cultivated chrysanthemums; the

Yu family, which grew carnations; and the Ling family, which specialized in bonsais.

By the early 1930s, some 33 hectares of land on Chongming was devoted to narcissus growing, and 80 percent of the blooms sold in Shanghai came from the island.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Shi farm expanded into a large plantation. Shi Kesong spent his childhood in the greenhouses, helping adults peel back the outer coverings of the bulbs to encourage earlier blooms.

"I remember from childhood that the greenhouse filled with narcissus was a place of warmth and happiness," said Shi Kesong, 67. "In winter, my mother often bathed me amid the fragrance of narcissus in the greenhouse, which was quite warm even in freezing temperatures."

However, the happy times were interrupted during the "cultural revolution" (1966-76), when



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