



BULB LOG 49.....9th December 2009



Narcissus

No prizes for guessing that the Narcissus will feature heavily in this week's bulb log again – as they are going to be flowering all through the winter months, so they are the plants that will attract my almost undivided attention.



Bulb house

Narcissus romieuxii albidus



Both this picture and the one below are of the same flower taken only a few minutes apart to illustrate the problems that you will face when trying to photograph white flowers with a camera on an automatic exposure setting. The picture above shows that the detail in the white has been burnt out as the camera tries to balance the dark and light areas of this high contrast image. The picture below retains the detail in the corona much better and I achieved this by simply switching the camera system to spot metering

so the exposure was set only on the white flower. If you do not have the option of spot metering you can achieve the same effect by underexposing the picture by around 1 to 1.5 stops. With digital cameras it is so easy to get good results as you get an almost instant review of your picture which you can assess and make any adjustments. Many people will not make this adjustment at the camera stage but wait and adjust it in the computer but when working with whites like this the detail can be so burnt out that it is just not there no matter how much you try and manipulate it so it is worth taking that bit of extra time to get it right when you are taking the picture.

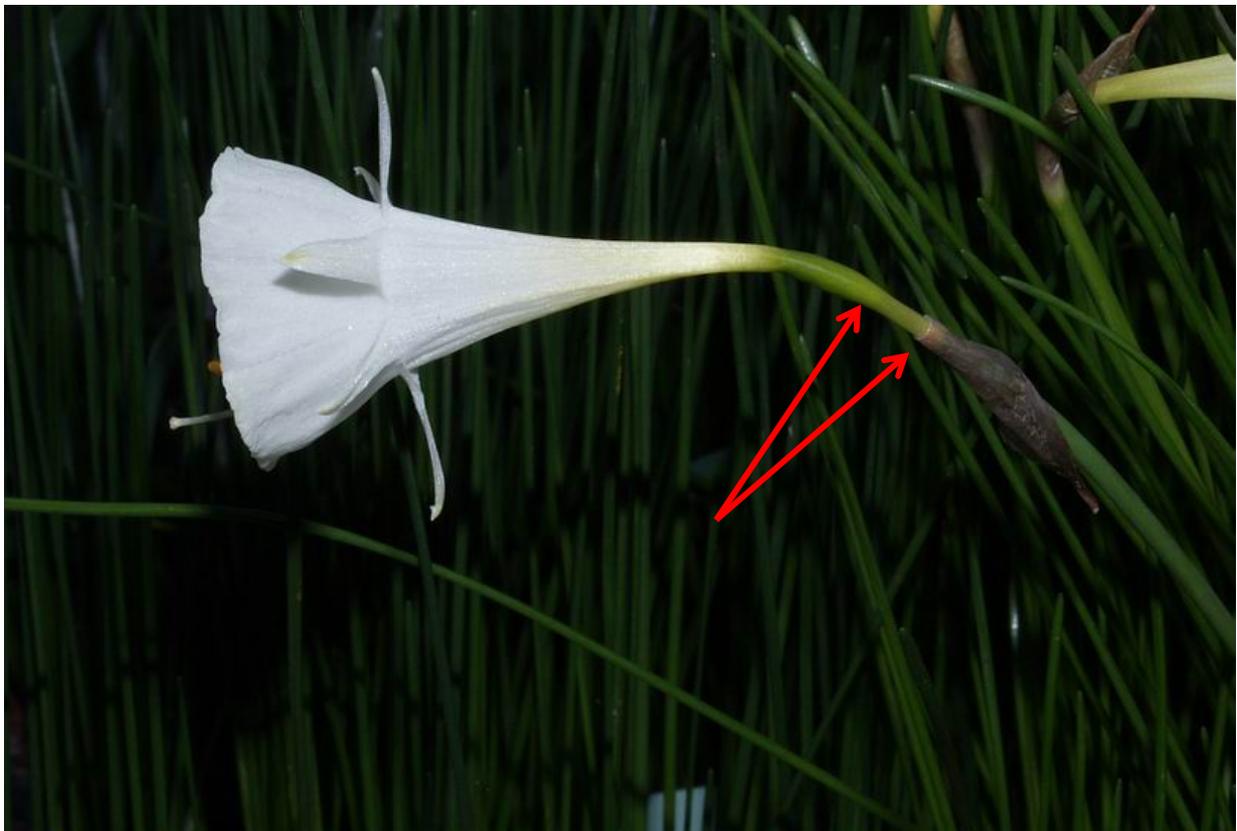




Narcissus

Among the diagnostic features used to separate the species and sub-species of these Narcissus is the pedicel and its length. The pedicel is the flower stem which attaches the flower to the scape or main stem. The pedicel is more obvious in multi flowered forms as you can see more easily the main stem with all the individual flower stems branching off it. Trying to sort out these very similar plants on the morphology (physical characteristics) alone is never easy as there are many overlaps where apparently different species seem to merge. If a complete DNA

study is ever carried out it may be more definitive in its results although I am a bit cautious of that science. We share over 90% (I forget the exact figure) of our DNA with chimpanzees so unless you sample the small number of DNA markers that are different you would not be able to tell the differences between me and a chimp – no comments now. I have peeled back the papery bract to reveal the the short pedicel on this flower.



Narcissus cantabricus foliosus

As well as flowering so early Narcissus cantabricus foliosus is distinguished from the species by having a short pedicel.



Narcissus romieuxii

Narcissus romieuxii should have virtually no pedicel with the ovary sitting directly on top of the scape as you can see to the left.

Many of the seedlings I am finding in the plunge and raising from seeds may appear at first to be like *Narcissus romieuxii* but have short pedicels indicating that they may have crossed with *Narcissus cantabricus foliosus*.

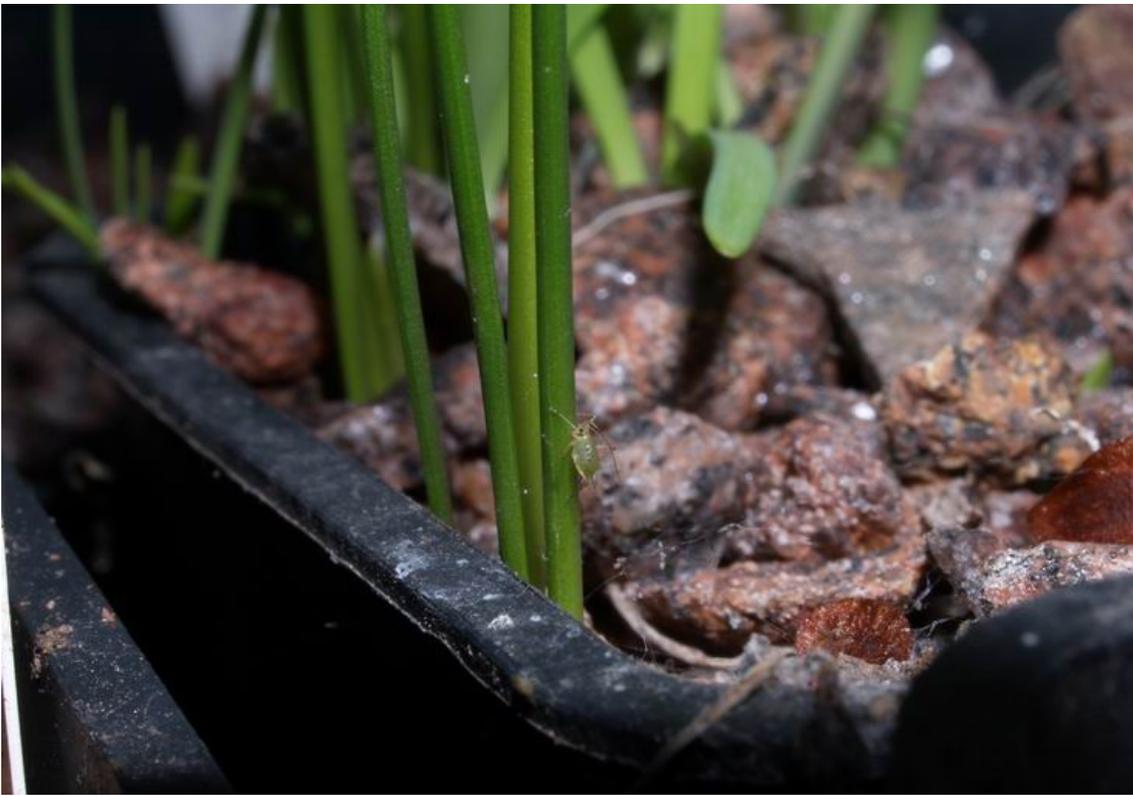
While most of these seedlings and species can look superficially similar when you start to study the details you will start to notice these slight differences that can help distinguish them.

One feature that I use a lot and cannot illustrate here is scent. I find that *N. cantabricus* have a strong sweet scent while *N. romieuxii* has only the slightest 'green' scent. What is a green scent I hear you ask? That is probably why scent has not been used more by taxonomists because it is such a subjective thing and difficult to describe as we have no scale to base it on. To me a green scent is a faint slightly bitter one.



Narcissus seedling

It is probably just the stage of this *Narcissus* flower as it unfolds from its bud and develops but I was struck by the square shape of the corona.



Aphids

No matter what time of year it is a bulb grower must always be on the look out for aphids. Despite the recent cold snaps when the bulb houses briefly froze up I spotted this lone green fly on a Narcissus stem. I always suggest that you should spray your bulb leaves with a systemic insecticide as soon as they emerge but for the last few years I have been trying to reduce my reliance on chemical sprays. Not that I have ever used much and only in the glass houses, about 5 to 10 ml of concentrate per year, and I have only ever had to buy a new bottle when the regulations have made it illegal to use the old one. Last year I only sprayed once towards the end of the season in the Fritillaria house. Careful and regular checking for any signs of aphids and immediately squashing them, after taking a picture, as soon as I see them means that they never get chance to build up their numbers.



Narcissus 'Cedric Morris'

The pots of Narcissus 'Cedric Morris' in the bulb house have now overtaken the ones outside and are showing colour so it will not be long before they are fully open.



Pots of Crocus

As well as being vigilant for aphids you also have to be on your guard against botrytis and I am sure that you can see what task needs to be carried out here?



Dead headed Pots of Crocus

Here are the same pots a few minutes later with all the fading flowers removed to prevent any risk of moulds infesting these plants. By the time the flowers have collapsed like that they have either been successful pollinated and the pollen tube will have reached the ovary and if they have not been successful then it is too late !



Crocus sieberi sieberi

Even before some of the autumn flowering Crocus species are finished flowering some of the early spring ones are poking their noses through. I showed *Crocus michelsonii* a few bulb logs back and now there are a number of others, including this pot of *Crocus sieberi sieberi*. Newly emerging shoots like this are another place that seems to attract any aphids so it is a good idea to keep a check on them as well as the leaves.



Ipheion sessile

Ipheion sessile or to give it its alternative name *Tristagma sessile* is another early flowering bulb with flowers often appearing before the turn of the year. I am keen on both the *Ipheion* and *Trigstama* bulbs that we grow and have applied to the seed exchange for a few other species of these South American bulbs.



Tecophilaea cyanocrocus

Likewise these shoots of *Tecophilaea cyanocrocus*, another early rising South American bulb, can prove an attraction to aphids and any stray slugs or snails that might have made their way into the bulb house or *Fritillaria* house on this occasion. I think I have got rid of the one that caused the damage to another pot of *Tecophilaea* I showed some weeks back. Despite the fact that the *Tecophilaea* have come through this early it will be March at least before these produce their fabulous blue flowers.



Fritillaria agrestis

The very first *Fritillaria* to show any signs of growth above the gravel is this seedling *F. agrestis* – a North American species. The single leaf tells me that it has not reached flowering size so I will have to feed it up and hope to get it to flowering size for the spring of 2011.



Narcissus flower

That brings me full cycle this week and back to the fabulous flowers on the Narcissus with their crystalline white corona framing the rich, golden yellow pollen-laden anthers.



Narcissus pollen

They are just waiting to attract a pollinating insect to transfer the pollen to the stigma or in the absence of that in the cold winter, me with my paint brush. The more seed I can get, the more of these wee beauties I will have to confuse me with what species they may be – or more likely they will be hybrids between the many forms that we grow so packed in together. Whatever the parentage of these seedlings is they will always show more health and vigour than many old established pots do and it is essential when maintaining a collection to raise plants from seed.