

**daffodil devotees**

Standing tall, ethereal and yellow, daffodils are a symbol of spring and hope. We meet three Canterbury growers dedicated to the blooms.

Words Yvonne Martin

### one million bulbs

Englishman Steve Marcham was travelling New Zealand with his partner a decade ago when he answered an advertisement for a gardener-handyman at an old house just outside Christchurch.

Driving up the gently curved carriageway to Otaihuna Lodge in Tai Tapu for an interview, he quickly realised this was no ordinary house.

"I thought 'wow'; I didn't think there was somewhere like this here. It is very much like home, growing up in the Cotswolds, and I worked at places like this when I was studying horticulture.

"I thought having somewhere like this to go to after immigrating around the world, I'm pretty lucky."

Steve was one of the first people hired by Miles Refo and Hall Cannon, two New Yorkers who bought Otaihuna in 2006. Fresh from a frenetic job as a key account manager for a landscaping firm in London, Steve arrived at an old Edwardian garden with sweeping lawns, woodlands and kereru whooshing overhead.

As head gardener, he is responsible for 12 hectares, about 8ha of which is in gardens and the rest is farmland, raising pigs, sheep and chickens for the kitchen. Every day from November onwards, Steve brings in a tray of vegetables and fruit for the chef to use in five-course degustation meals.

And every day, Steve arrives at the front door with baskets of fresh flowers – arum lilies, dahlias, chrysanthemums, hippeastrum and lisianthus – to fill the lodge's 20-odd vases and scent the air.

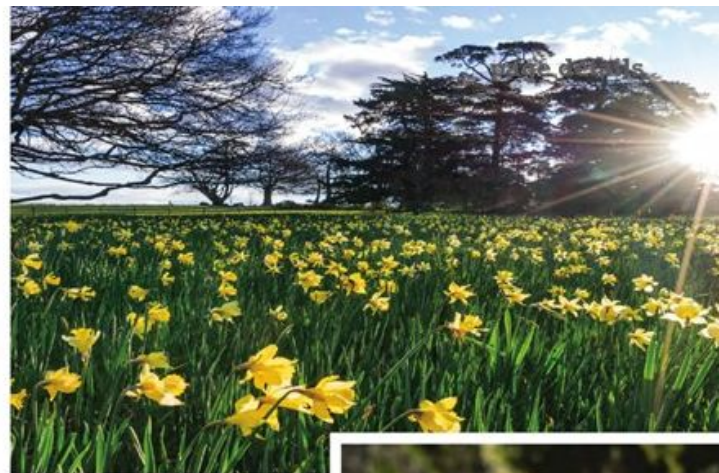
But, undoubtedly, the flower for which Otaihuna is best known, and which attracts brides and romantics from all over the world, is the daffodil.

Narcissus, the genus that includes spring sweethearts such as daffodils and jonquils, is named after the mythical youth who fell in love with his own reflection.

Beneath a huge oak tree and across a lake from the luxury lodge, which was built by politician Sir Heaton Rhodes in 1895 as a wedding present for his wife, lies a field of dreams.

Every spring, thousands of yellow, cream and orange daffodils open in a "look at me" spectacle.

"It is an amazing sight. I look at them,



especially coming to work in the morning, and you get this wave of yellow. You cannot not notice them when they're in full flower," Steve says.

One of Steve's early predecessors, Alfred Lowe, loved daffodils. Also British, he trained at Kew Gardens and started working at Otaihuna in 1895. He became an expert at breeding and naturalising daffodils and his influence extended beyond Otaihuna's gates.

Alfred organised public bulb sales each year. After Alfred's death in 1924, Sir Heaton donated the proceeds from the bulb sales towards the building of the library in Tai Tapu. Bulbs from Otaihuna were gifted to form part of the collection in Christchurch's Botanic Gardens.

After the 2011 earthquakes, when business had slowed, Miles dug up two square metres of the daffodil paddock and lifted and counted the bulbs. There were 416 and extrapolating from this, he estimates there are more than a million bulbs.

"If I worked at the same speed for eight hours a day, five days a week, it would take me almost five years to lift the whole paddock by hand," Miles says.

Of the million bulbs, Steve estimates only 5 per cent actually flower.

"But when you've got a million bulbs, that's a lot of flowers. They are crowded, so one day they will need to be lifted and separated and spread out."

Steve does little to maintain the daffodils, apart from watering them at the right times. He says there's a semblance of design in the way they're planted.



Photo: Iain McGregor

"The variety of daffodils – the cups, the trumpets and jonquils – are grouped. There are densities in patches, but with the hybridising over years, it's all a bit blurred and very mixed."

Among Otaihuna's blooms is a snow-white daffodil with a glowing red cup called 'Sir Heaton Rhodes', registered in 1955, the year before the MP's death at 95. Another daffodil with a creamy yellow cup, registered before 1914, bears the name 'Otaihuna'.

While Otaihuna isn't hosting a public daffodil day this year, the lodge does welcome groups of 10 or more for guided tours by prior appointment year-round for \$20 a person.

And once daffodil season is over and the paddock has been cut for hay, porcini mushrooms rise mysteriously from the ground and are harvested to feed the lodge's guests. They're earthy and delicious, with a strong nutty flavour, but they cannot compete with the beauty and vibrancy of that most showy of flowers.