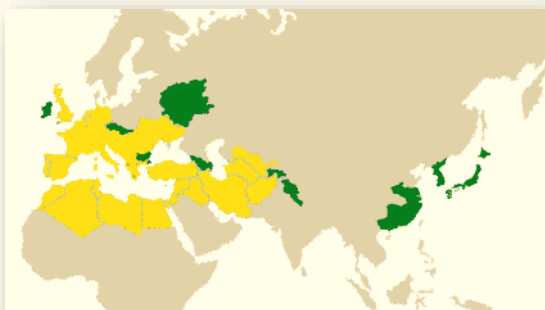


Chinese Sacred Lily 水仙

Narcissus tazetta
subsp. *chinensis*

In China, the Chinese Sacred Lily is prized as a symbol of prosperity and good fortune, even more so if the bulbs flower during Spring Festival, 春节, Chinese New Year.

However, the Chinese Sacred Lily isn't a *lily*, it's a type of *daffodil*, in the Amaryllidaceae family *not* the Lily family, Liliaceae. It has a multiflowered inflorescence, commonly referred to here as a *jonquil*; daffodils usually have just a single flower. It's a subspecies of *Narcissus tazetta* – and although it is widely cultivated and naturalised in many regions of China, it doesn't come from China

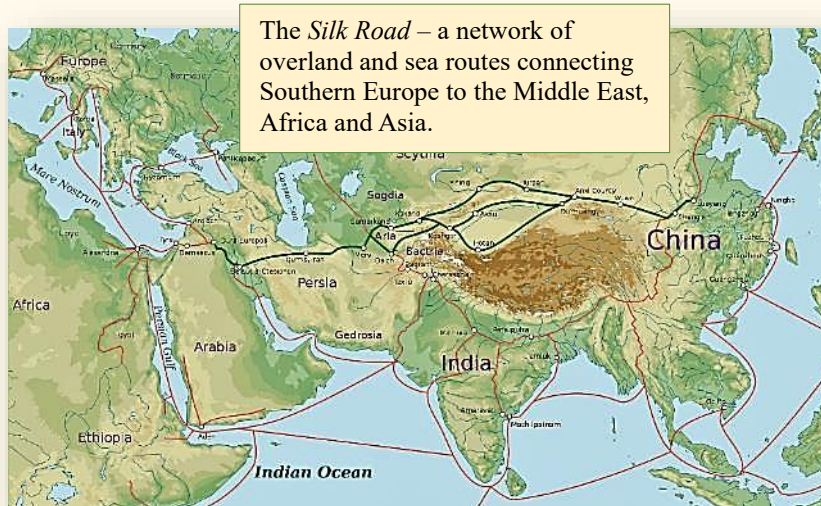


Distribution of *Narcissus* in Europe, North Africa and Asia

▲ Natural ▲ Introduced/naturalised

Narcissus species are variously known as daffodils, jonquils or narcissus. The flowers are mostly yellow and/or white although some can be pink, orange or red. Most have their origins in the meadows and woods of Southern Europe and North Africa. The Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), in the western Mediterranean, is the centre of diversity for the genus which arose 20 million years ago.

Narcissus tazetta is native to the Mediterranean region. How did it reach China? About 1,200 years ago, towards the end of the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907) it is believed to have been carried via the Silk Road to China. Bulbs remain dormant for 7 – 8 months of the year so it would not have been difficult to transport them 6,400 km by camel from the Mediterranean to China. There is also the possibility that bulbs were brought to China by Arab or Persian traders using ancient sea-trading routes.



The plants are known to have been cultivated for over 1000 years in China but they have also become so widely naturalised in China, Japan and Korea that over 100 years ago, it was named in 1847 by botanist M. Roemer *Narcissus tazetta* subsp. *chinensis* assuming that it was native to the region.

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, list this subspecies as *native* to Southeast China and Japan, and *introduced* to Korea, however, the **Flora of China** lists *Narcissus tazetta* as ‘widely cultivated as an ornamental in China. It was reported to be introduced 1300 – 1400 years ago and has become naturalized in coastal areas and offshore islands of Fujian and Zhejiang’.

How long does it take for a new species to develop? Ecologists Claire Brandenburger, Angela Moles and colleagues at the University of NSW studied a range of weeds introduced into Australia and their adaptations to very different environmental conditions. They found many species had changed so



Chinese Sacred Lily, Ko Shan Theatre, 2019. Photo: Shingmoa Yeuanfen, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

significantly from their original populations to the point where the ecologists considered the changes to be more than adequate for the Australian plants to be classified as *new species*. The first Europeans settled in Australia in 1888, so the *new species* have developed in less than 200 years. So, is it possible that the Chinese Sacred Lily, cultivated and naturalised in China for well over 1000 years, has similarly evolved from the Mediterranean *Narcissus tazetta* to the plants now known as *N. tazetta* subsp. *chinensis*?

Daffodils (*Narcissus* spp., including *N. tazetta*) have been introduced to, and naturalised in, many parts of the world, including Australia. In North America, homesick Chinese labourers and miners imported bulbs of *N. tazetta* subsp. *chinensis* from their homeland. These were grown in shallow bowls filled with pebbles and water to celebrate Chinese New Year.

Not only is it auspicious to have a bowl or pot of Sacred Chinese Lilies in the house for New Year, but even more so if you have a skilful bulb carver who can dissect the *Narcissus* bulbs, forcing the leaves to twist and curl as they grow. Some are so skilful that the carved bulbs can take the appearance of roosters or snails. This is referred to as the *crab-claw* carving method.



Chinese New Year in 1850's Oregon.
Peter Britt, Southern Oregon Historical Society. L. Hodgson, 2017, The Laidback Gardener



Narcissus tazetta bulb carved to form a stylized rooster.
Photo: 用心阁 at zh.wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0
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Alison Downing, Brian Atwell, Karen Marais, Kevin Downing
School of Natural Sciences



MACQUARIE
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