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HEADLINE: Nantucket blossoms;
The island's annual daffodil festival is a time for celebration, no matter what the weather;
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BYLINE: By Lisa Mullenneaux, Globe Correspondent

DATELINE: NANTUCKET

BODY:
Put some air in the tires of the old "woody" wagon and grab a picnic basket. It's time for Nantucket's 24th annual Daffodil Festival.

From Friday, April 24, through Sunday, April 26, islanders banish Old Man Winter and gear up for a season in the sun. A giant wreath of daffodils on the Brant Point Lighthouse greets incoming ferry passengers, who will spot legions of the lemon-yellow flowers along sandy roads, in shop windows, and on antique cars. It's a cheerful celebration punctuated by high-spirited folk dancing from Boston's Morris Men and a "tailgate" picnic where beer and potato chips are conspicuously absent.

"It usually snows," says real estate broker Robert Young, "but we always have a lot of fun." Needlepoint artist Erica Wilson, whose gourmet lunch usually claims a blue ribbon, agrees that spring weather can be iffy 30 miles at sea. "We never know what the weather will do," says Wilson. "Last year was one of the nicest weekends ever, but we've also eaten our picnics in tightly closed cars in the pouring rain."

Jean MacAusland inspired daffodil madness in 1974 when she donated a million Dutch bulbs and invited volunteers to plant them along the island's main roads. Her intent, she says, was "to create something the whole community could enjoy." She chose the emblem of spring because "nothing daunts a daffodil. They're perennials and aren't appetizing to our island's deer and cottontails."

The blossoms, as well as the spirit, took hold, and cyclists who make the 13-mile loop to Siasconset, through Polpis, and back to Nantucket town see thousands of trumpeting flowers. During the festival, they're on display in Main Street shop windows, at a flower show sponsored by the Nantucket Garden Club and

the American Daffodil Society, and at 12 inns. The inn tour takes place from 2 to 5 p.m. on Friday; get tickets and a map from the Chamber of Commerce.

The real fun begins at Saturday's antique-car parade. Classic cars (at least 20 years old) festooned with yellow blossoms and green streamers line up on cobblestoned Main Street at noon to win prizes. Then they meander seven miles to Siasconset at the island's eastern edge. Getting them there is half the fun. "You're happy if you get through the parade and nothing blows up or falls off," says Alfred Kuehn, owner of a 1953 Cadillac. Sure enough, each year when real estate maven Hamilton Heard's 1924 Graham Brothers fire truck fizzles, he laughingly accepts a tow.

Last year, 125 vintage vehicles - the most ever - competed after owners paid the \$ 15 fee (\$ 30 after April 1). Resident Robert Young wasn't taking any chances: He entered a 1958 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, a 1950 Caddy, and a 1931 Ford pickup. But top awards went to a rival's Ford pickup, as well as to a 1969 Excalibur Phaeton and a 1960 Mercedes 220SE Cabriolet.

The parade climaxes with a tailgate picnic at the town square in Siasconset from 1 to 3 p.m. - and it's quite a meal. Anyone can attend this picnic, though only food contestants should drive because parking space is limited. The alternative is to grab a bag lunch and hop a bike, moped, or the bus that leaves from Barrett's Tours at 20 Federal St.

Picnic setups range from white linen tables heaped with Cornish hens, petit fours, and chardonnay to a 1989 winner who served K rations on a blanket next to his 1942 army Jeep. "We look for originality as well as presentation," says Sheila Cabral, this year's judge.

Interrupting this splendor in the grass are 10 men dressed in white with sleigh bells attached to their legs, who prance, whoop, and clash batons to a drum beat and concertina. "Our dances are traditional folk rituals to honor spring," says Tom Krustal, a founder of the Pinewoods Morris Men. "If we didn't come to Nantucket, you wouldn't have any crops or rain this year," he jokes.

If your Pierce Arrow or apple crumb cake hasn't impressed judges, the festival gives you one more chance. You can enter homegrown daffies in the Garden Club's Daffodil Show from 2 to 5 p.m. on Sunday. The American Daffodil Society sends judges from across the country to review hundreds of varieties, from trumpet to Tazetta, artistically arranged. Admission to the Point Breeze Hotel on Easton Street is free.

Speaking of hotels, make your room reservations as far ahead as possible. Choices range from \$ 75 a night at a bed-and-breakfast inn to \$ 250 at pricier hotels, and most will require a two-night minimum. The Nantucket Information Bureau (phone 508-228-0925) can tell you which hotels have vacancies.

Many lodging places are worth a look even if you're not boarding. Step into the 1845 Jared Coffin House (508-228-2405) and a fire will be blazing in the sitting room. You can sink into an overstuffed chair, sip an Irish coffee (the best on the island), and plan your evening meal. B & Bs offer moderate rates and common rooms where guests can swap festival stories over sherry in the evenings. The Anchor Inn on Centre Street (508-228-0072) was originally a whaling captain's home, and true to its heritage offers nothing as modern as TVs, room phones, or Jacuzzis. Instead, innkeepers Charles and Ann Balas appeal to your sweet tooth with fine chocolates. Unlike the Anchor Inn, Matthew and Mary Parker's Seven Sea Street (508-228-3577) boasts a modern, red oak design with New England touches like canopy beds, hooked rugs, and a widow's walk.

Not all restaurants are open for Daffodil Festival, and dinner reservations are recommended. For elegant dining, try the Boarding House (508-228-9622) (508-228-2121), and American Seasons (508-228-7111). For cheaper fare, sample triple-deck sandwiches and steaming chowder at The Brotherhood or Arno's. The Woodbox (508-228-0587) serves a bountiful breakfast of popovers and eggs, pancakes, or waffles heaped with fresh fruit. You can order a picnic lunch at Provisions or Via Provence.

All of Nantucket is a living museum, but only one historic site is open during Daffodil Weekend. At the Whaling Museum on Broad Street, you'll see the skeleton of a 43-foot finback whale and other trophies of the island's seafaring past. The Museum Shop next door sells spermaceti candles, beach plum jam, antique furniture, and books about the island. And as a souvenir, don't forget to buy a pair of Nantucket "reds" (cranberry-colored slacks) at Murray's Toggery. As they fade to pink, you'll be reminded of "the land far out to sea."

IF YOU GO . . .

Traveling to Nantucket is easy; leaving is hard. Cape Air (800-352-0714) and USAir Express (800-428-4322) fly from Boston. Commuter planes serve the island from Hyannis, New Bedford, and Providence. Steamship Authority ferries (508-477-8600) leave three times a day from Hyannis for the 2 1/2-hour trip. Hy-line Cruises runs a high-speed ferry from Hyannis (800-492-8082).

For information call the Nantucket Chamber of Commerce (508-228-1700); for accommodations, call the Nantucket Information Bureau (508- 228-0925).

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