



Crocus



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Introduction: Crocus (plural: crocuses or croci) is a perennial spring flowering plant that grows from a corm originally found across Europe and Asia. It made its way all across Asia, Europe, and Canada, to the US.

Varieties: There are about 50 cultivated species of crocus. The flowers are cup-shaped, solitary, and taper off into a narrow tube. The color can vary enormously among species; lilac, mauve, yellow and white are still the most prominent. The leaf is grass-like and has a white central stripe along the leaf axis. Crocus flowers typically have three stamens.

The genus *Crocus* is placed botanically in the iris family *Iridaceae*. They are hardy perennial plants and are usually first to bloom in spring. Crocus are often sold as Dutch Crocus, which is *c. vernas*. There are several species of fall-winter flowering crocus that are less commonly found.

History: The name Crocus is derived from the Latin adjective *crocatius*, meaning saffron yellow. The Greek word for "saffron" is *krokos*, while the Arabic word saffron or *zafaran*, means yellow.

The spice saffron is obtained from the stigmas of *Crocus sativus*, an autumn/fall-blooming species with lilac or white flowers. This spice is usually found in speciality stores and is very expensive. As a matter of fact, saffron is the most expensive spice in the world today. Saffron is harvested by hand. Over 4,000 dried crocus stigmas yield one ounce of saffron! Saffron is used in Mediterranean rice dishes as a flavoring and for its yellow color..

The crocus flower was seen in the Bronze Age Minoan Crete culture, about 1500 BC when women wore the flowers in their hair and saffron-based cosmetics. The flowers were pictured on saffron-dyed cloth. In Egypt there are artifacts that date back to 1600 BC. The Egyptians, Greeks, and the Minoans of Crete (2100-1600 BC) all grew the crocus. Roman women used saffron to dye their hair and textiles yellow.

The crocus corm has a history of trade throughout Europe that a few pounds of corms served as a loan of gold or jewels. It was being used medicinally in Egypt *Papyrus Ebers*, a pharmaceutical record predates the Minoan culture by over 1,000 years. Crocus even pops up in the Old Testament in the Song of Solomon. Medieval monks substituted saffron for gold leaf in their religious paintings.

The first crocus in the Netherlands came from corms brought back from the Roman Empire in the 1560s. A few corms were forwarded to Carolus Clusius at the botanical garden in Leiden. By 1620, new garden varieties had been developed, such as the cream-colored crocus similar to varieties still on the market today.

Landscape Use and Planting: The crocus does well in most urban areas of California (Zones 7 through 9) since the winters are mild. The corms bloom faster and longer as well. Crocus is often used to naturalize landscape beds and boarder areas.

In late October or in November the corms should be planted 4 to 6 inches deep in a rich well drained soil with the pointy side up. Fertilize, tamp the soil down and water well.

General Care: When planting crocus it is best to fertilize them. After they bloom and the tops die back it is best to remove them. Sometimes the corms need to be divided so they can grow better and not get stunted. If there are too many shoots coming up in one place, you should divide them and plant them 4-6 inches apart.

Although many crocus species set viable seed, all are propagated with corms (bulbs). *Crocus sativus* is unable to set viable seed and must be propagated vegetatively with the corms.

A word of warning: Never confuse saffron or any other autumn-blooming crocus with the similar looking, but highly poisonous, colchicums. It's easy to get them mixed up, since the 60 to 70 species of fall-blooming corms in the genus *Colchicum* are commonly referred to as "autumn crocus" or "meadow saffron."

A good way to tell them apart is to remember that colchicums have six stamens while crocuses have only three. Colchicums also belong to the Liliaceae or Lily Family (though maybe it would be better to think of them as members of the Soprano family) while crocuses are in the Iridaceae or Iris Family.

Fertilization: Crocus perform best in well structured, well drained soil rich in nutrients. It is a good idea to fertilize with a small amount of fertilizer when planting and not to worry about fertilizing them again till the next year. If you fertilize too much you can force foliage and may not get any blooms. Soluble fertilizers that are dissolved and applied with water are good choices.

Irrigation: As with any type of bulbs, the corms perform best when soil is kept uniformly moist but it is best not to overwater so that soil aeration is reduced as they may rot.

Pest Management: Crocus don't have many pests, the worst problem are animals that dig up the corms.

Sources: The corms are inexpensive and readily available at garden centers and in garden cataloges.



The Crocus Plant

