



Hardy Crocus Facts

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The Arrival of Spring

Nothing signals the arrival of spring and warmer weather more than the sight of crocus bulbs pushing their heads through lingering snow. However, strictly speaking, crocus do not grow from bulbs, but from corms. These swollen underground stems store nutrition for the plant..

History of the Crocus

While the origin of the crocus is unknown, Greek writers made mention of *Crocus sativus* (Saffron crocus), as early as 300 B.C. when it was seen in the regions of Greece and Turkey. This fall flowering crocus, which is the source of saffron spice, was also found throughout the northern coast of Africa and the Middle East and was traded commercially. The spice was, and still is, used for seasoning, dye and medicine. (Interesting note: It takes in excess of 70,000 flowers to yield just 0.45 kilograms (one pound) of saffron spice.) Writings from the mid 1600's also make mention of the saffron crocus growing wild in England. The Saffron crocus is a member of the lily family (Liliaceae) and it should not be confused with the spring-flowering crocus, which is a member of the Iris family (Iridaceae). This paper will focus on the spring-flowering varieties.

Growing Requirements

Crocus plants are fairly short (0 - 20 cm) in height with grass-like leaves. Typical crocus colours include yellow, purple, and white. The flowers will close up at night and on a cold or dull day. Crocus prefer to be grown in full to partial sun and in well drained soil. If the soil is too wet then the corms can rot. In most cases it is easy for the spring crocus to achieve their light requirements as they bloom well before leaves appear on trees. Most types of crocus are hardy to -32 degrees celsius and grow in Hardiness Zones 3-9.

How to plant, fertilize and grow crocus

Crocus corms should be planted in the fall (pointy end up) 8 to 10 cm deep in well drained soil 6 to 8 weeks before a hard frost is expected. The soil can be augmented with organic matter to make sure it is well drained and compost for additional nutrition. It is suggested that the corms should be planted 5-7 cms apart in groups or clusters for the best visual effect. After planting, the area should be well watered. Crocus can also be planted in lawns where they will naturally spread (naturalize). It is important to note that crocus in lawns must be allowed to die down naturally and the leaves allowed to yellow, before they are mowed over. Once crocus are planted, they tend to look after themselves. If the fall weather is dry, the crocus beds can be watered, but not waterlogged. Also the beds can be covered with mulch before winter.

Storing Corms

In most cases the digging and storing of crocus corms in the fall isn't necessary as they are quite hardy. Also corms placed in storage are prone to rot and mold. However lifting and separating large old clumps of crocus can result in better yields and bigger blossoms in the next season. Keep in mind that crocus plants require a chilling period of 15 weeks in a cool and dry spot before sprouting time.

Special Needs (diseases, pests)

Squirrels, mice, and voles like to dig up crocus corms and feed on them. This challenge can be overcome by planting the corms in buried wire cages or lay chicken wire on top of the ground where the corms have been planted. Squirrels and birds also like to pick off the crocus flowers. Also rabbits like to eat off crocus as they come up through the ground. The potential remedy for this is to plant the crocus in an area not frequented by rabbits or to put netting over the crocus, which tends to spoil the affect of the blooms.

Varieties to Grow

Crocus corms for spring-blooming crocus are quite easy to find in the fall in grocery stores, hardware stores and a variety of other places. The challenge with this is that quite often the type of crocus is often not shown on the label.

There are many varieties of crocus with varying bloom sizes and colours.

- Tri- colour crocus (*Crocus sieberi Tricolor*) has vivid grape-purple flowers with a snow white base and sunny yellow center. It is said to be deer resistant.
- Pickwick giant crocus (*Crocus vernus 'Pickwick'*) is violet-blue in colour with bright white stripes.
- Dorothy snow crocus ('Golden Crocus Dorothy') is golden yellow in colour.

References

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