

CROCUS GROUP BULLETIN NO.16

Hon. Secretary's Notes

The Crocus Group now consists of 76 members, and there has been no increase in their countries of origin, namely seven.

I decided that it would be too difficult to stage a Crocus Group stand at the R.H.S. show on 11 October 1988 - my grateful thanks to those who had offered to help. When I got down to details, I kept visualizing crocuses brought into a warm room and turning what can only be described as 'inside out'. This was unlikely to encourage anyone to grow them for garden decoration. They can make a show comparable to C.TOMMASINIANUS in the Spring and I still feel they ought to be much more widely grown for Autumn colour.

PROGRAMME 1988/89

Saturday 8th October 1988 at 11am

MR MICHAEL SALMON of Monocot Seeds, Jacklands, Jacklands Bridge, Tickenham, Clevedon, Avon, has invited us to visit his nursery, which is about 4 miles from Junction 20 of the M5. After leaving the motorway take B3133 signposted Clevedon (Nailsea). At the roundabout take 3rd exit signposted Nailsea. At mini roundabout turn right into Tickenham Road, which is B3130, still signposted Nailsea. Go through Tickenham. Soon after Star Inn, keep on main road, do not fork left. Road goes down hill, with a bus stop on left. Immediately before stone bridge on right, drive into track on left where there should be a sign saying Monocot and room to park.

The extremely interesting nursery run by Mr Salmon consists of several greenhouses, bulb frames, raised beds, etc. He was at one time associated with Jim Archibald at Buckshaw, and he has travelled extensively in S.Europe and elsewhere in search of plants.

The nursery will, I hope have plants and seeds for sale to those interested.

Any Crocus Group members who happen to have interesting crocuses in flower are asked to bring them to show to the rest of us.

Saturday 25th February 1989

Mr & Mrs Alan Edwards of TRYFAN, Burney Road, Westhumble, Dorking, Surrey RH5 6AT, have kindly invited us to see their crocuses and other interesting plants. They will provide coffee and biscuits for those arriving at 11.00am.

Directions:- Motorway travellers leave M25 at exit 9 (Leatherhead) and take A24 towards Dorking. Turn right immediately after Burford Bridge Hotel roundabout into Westhumble Street. Continue up hill passing Boxhill and Westhumble Station and then take second turning left. Their house is first on the left in Burney Road. Parking in Burney Road (room for about 12 cars in vicinity of house). If travelling from south or east, take A24 for one mile north of Dorking and turn left (sign for Polesden Lacy). Same directions thereafter.

Bring a picnic lunch and you can eat it under cover and talk about crocuses. Telephone Dorking 883775 - please notify them if you intend coming.

Tuesday 14th March 1989

Crocus lecture by Chris Brickell at 5.30pm in RHS New Hall, probable title 'Autumn Crocuses'. This excellent lecturer needs no introduction except to say that he has for many years grown crocuses for his own pleasure and relaxation.

The lecture will be followed by an auction of crocuses to raise money for Crocus Group funds.

Please support this auction by bringing and buying plants and if you cannot come yourself get someone to bring and buy for you.

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AUTUMN-FLOWERING CROCUSES IN PORTUGAL

Earlier students of the genus Crocus, such as Herbert, Maw and Bowles, found the autumnal crocuses of the Iberian peninsula somewhat confusing. In The Crocus (1982) Brian Mathew sorted them into the Pyrenaean C.nudiflorus and three subspecies of C.serotinus: subsp. serotinus with the fibres of the corm-tunic coarsely netted, subsp. clusii with finely netted tunics, and subsp. salzmannii in which the fibres are parallel without reticulation.

At the end of October 1986 Mrs Raven and I went to Portugal with the express object of discovering more about the distribution and ecology of subspecies serotinus and clusii. The third subspecies, salzmannii, was thought by Mr Mathew to be confined to Spain and North Africa; but both Coutinho's Flora de Portugal (1939) and Polunin & Smythies' Flowers of South West Europe (1973) reported that C.asturicus Herbert, included by Mathew in subsp. salzmannii, was to be found on the Serra de Estrela north-east of Coimbra, and this too I was keen to investigate.

Within three quarters of an hour of picking up our hire-car at Lisbon airport we had crossed the bridge over the Tagus and were driving south through the Forest Reserve towards Sesimbra when I cried 'Crocus', and there, in the twenty yards of pine forest verging on the road was our first subject in full flower. It proved to be subspecies serotinus; the coarse reticulation of the corm-tunic, with the fibres oddly flattened and ribbon-like, was very distinctive and the determination was supported by the number of leaves, seldom more than four in this subspecies, but usually more numerous in subsp. clusii. The plants were growing in almost pure sand under thin Pinus pinaster, with scattered Cistus salvifolius and little else. We saw one albino, but most of the flowers were of a uniform lilac to purple, some with broad striping.

The following day we drove on south to Faro in the Algarve which, from records and herbarium specimens, would seem to have been the main centre for this subspecies. We failed altogether to find it; and friends, who a little later spent five days at Faro and were instructed to search, had no better success. It is likely that the massive development of this coast as a string of holiday resorts will have destroyed many of the old sites. This crocus is, however, locally abundant on the Cabo Sao Vicente plateau, growing on gravelly limestone banks among Cistus, Rosemary, Calendula suffruticosa and Asteriscus maritimus. We also saw it, on our way north again, close to Melides (again near the coast) in sandy pinewoods - this time Pinus halepensis predominated through PP.pinaster and pinsea were also present. Here the pH of the soil was 5.5 to 6.0, so that this subspecies would seem to be equally happy on pure limestone and in moderately acid conditions. Colours were variable and included a very rich red-purple.

We did not come upon subspecies clusii until we had crossed again to the north bank of the Tagus, but then encountered it frequently, especially near Malveira where a member of the Crocus Group, Henning Christiansen, very kindly invited us to visit his fascinating garden and showed us the crocus in three places nearby. One of these was in considerable shade of a steep-sloping wood, but for the most part the plants that we saw here and elsewhere were in open grassland or on heaths. The flower-colour was more constantly a palish purple than in subsp. serotinus, but we did find one white with only the faintest mauve tinge at the base of the outer segments.

Finally we arrived on the Serra de Estrela, a most impressive granite plateau with sweeping views in every direction and here and there strangely moulded blocks and pinnacles as if sculpted by Henry Moore. Here, at between 1500 and 1800 metres, in sparse Nardus sward among juniper and Halimium alyssoides, we found our crocus. This was much too high for subsp. clussii, the leaves were a darker green than the others we had seen, and the fibres of the corm were strictly parallel. Specimens taken to Kew have since been confirmed as 'Crocus asturicus' by Brian Mathew, but he is now inclined to think that this northern plant is distinct from the larger Crocus serotinus subsp. salzmannii of the south and should be given separate rank, presumably as a fourth subspecies of C. serotinus.

I had hoped to find the uniquely distinctive leaves of a spring crocus, C. carpetanus, which is also reported to be abundant on the Estrela, but they seemed not to have survived the summer.

The weather was perfect for botanising, though apart from the crocuses little was in flower in October-November. In late spring extensive heaths of Portugal must be a blaze of colour with Cistus (we saw eight different species), Erica (Portugal can show nine of them) and a wide variety of bulbs.

DICK DAVID