

CROCUS GROUP BULLETIN NO.19

Hon Secretary's Notes

The first Crocus Group 'Silver Spoon' was won by Dave King with a pot of *C.seiberi* 'Bowles White'. [The Alpine Garden Society has not actually let him have it yet, but I gather it will be presented at their AGM in November.]

As a result of paying for the spoons the balance is a bit lower than usual. I am not suggesting anything strange like a subscription is needed but this bulletin is shorter than usual.

Provided everyone supports our auctions, either by sending corms or coming and buying them, all will be well.

There is a trial of Autumn Crocuses at Wisley - I am afraid I never got round to sending any corms myself but it is worth a visit if you are in that area. If nothing else, one can hope it will sort out some of the names used by bulb merchants and perhaps convince a few people that real autumn flowering crocuses do exist - not just colchicums.

Primrose Warburg
South Hayes
Yarnells Hill
Oxford OX2 9BG

Tel: Oxford 247 883

PROGRAM 1991/92

Saturday - 19 October 1991

Brian Mathew has kindly agreed to show us the collection of living crocuses 'behind the scenes' at Kew Gardens and afterwards to show us rare crocuses on herbarium sheets.

Meet outside the Main Gate to Kew Gardens at 10.30am. Do not enter the Gardens; he will get us in by a side door.

Sunday - 27 October 1991

You are invited to the garden of your Hon Sec, **Primrose Warburg**, to see crocuses growing outside in grass and seeding themselves around. Come at 11 am - I will provide coffee. Bring a sandwich lunch and afterwards we will have an auction of any crocuses anyone has to spare, to go towards Crocus Group funds.

I live 2½ miles West of Oxford, shown as Botley/North Hinksey on maps, and on a private road at the summit of Yarnells Hill (address above).

(CORRECTIONS TO CROCUS GROUP PROGRAM NO.19)

Saturday - 22 February 1992

The Crocus Group is invited to the garden of **Tony Colmer, Woodside, Send Barns Lane, Send, Woking, Surrey GU23 7BY - Tel: 0483 223 073**

He has kindly offered us coffee when we arrive at 11.00am and somewhere to eat a picnic lunch. Afterwards we are invited to visit the nearby garden of **Joy Hulme, Summerley, Heath Side, Park Road, Woking - Tel: 0483-761 163**

She has very kindly offered to provide tea. Please say if you intend to come and bring any interesting crocuses you may have out to show the rest of us.

Sunday - 1 March 1992

Mr & Mrs Ray Cobb have kindly invited us to come and see their crocuses, not to mention snowdrops and many other bulbs. Ray holds the National Crocus Collection. Telephone beforehand if you intend to come (0602-281 525). Arrive at 11.00am, when coffee will be provided, and bring a picnic lunch. The address is: **188 Bramcote Lane, Wollaton, Nottingham NG8 2QN**. On receipt of an SAE they will send you a map.

Tuesday - 10 March 1992

Alan Edwards has agreed to give the annual Crocus Lecture. Alan is a member of the Joint Rock Committee and is a very experienced photographer of crocuses in the wild. He also grows them superbly in his garden. Exact title will appear in the Spring Newsletter. The lecture will start at the earlier time of **5pm** and will be followed by an auction of crocuses in aid of Crocus Group funds. Please support this if you can, or send me spare corms, if you cannot be there.

CROCUS LANDS OF THE EAST by Brian Mathew cont.....

Although these rich isolated mountain blocks of the west, such as Ulu Dag and Honaz Dag, are of great interest I think it is the eastern end of the country which has provided me with a greater sense of excitement, for its country districts are undoubtedly primitive and give one a greater sense of exploration. The upland villages are distinctive with their mud-brick flat-roofed houses providing thick insulation against the intense winter cold and cool shade for the long dry summers. Here, harvesting in the autumn is a picturesque scene, long since forgotten in the west, with squeaky carts drawn by oxen or water buffalo bringing the corn to a flat area near the villages where it is spread in a large circle. Horses, dragging a plank upon which the farmer balances, go round and round interminably thus beating out the grain whilst another worker tosses the straw in the air to be blown aside from the heavier grain. These and other delightful rustic scenes provide short but welcome interludes to the more urgent business of plant-hunting which must inevitably be fairly intense to make the most of the short flowering season for autumnal crocuses.

This was the background to a memorable September expedition into the Easter Pontus mountains and to the hills surrounding the beautiful Lake Van which lies at 2000 metres altitude in the south-east corner of Turkey. In these areas there occur several species which are closely related and form a natural taxonomic group within the genus. I had been led to suppose from field notes on herbarium specimens that in certain localities two or three of these occur intermingled, this in turn leading to the question as to whether or not they were distinct species or just variants of one rather variable species. The main questions to be resolved were: the relationship between two white-flowered plants known as *C.vallicola* and *C.suworowianus*, and how the former differed, if at all, in its choice of habitat from the orange-yellow *C.scharojanii*. The first of these matters has caused confusion ever since the two were described as new species in the mid 19th century, since they are superficially very alike and do occupy a similar region of Turkey. Indeed, at one time, *C.suworowianus* was regarded as little more than a variant of *C.vallicola*. However, close observation in the field, reveals that the two are distinct and that they do not occupy the same ecological niche, although their overall similarity of flower indicates that they might well compete for the same pollinators. Apart from the subtle differences in morphological characters, which I was able to check to my satisfaction using hundreds of specimens, it was apparent that *C.suworowianus* occupies much drier and generally higher situations than *C.vallicola* and never did I see mixed or even closely adjacent populations. The combined differences were more convincing than I had expected, but confirmed my suspicions that *C.suworowianus* was, in fact, not all that closely related to *C.vallicola* but was more nearly allied to *C.kotschyanus*, a lilac-flowered species from central and southern Turkey. Living material brought back to Kew enabled chromosome studies to be made and these results added weight to the view that *C.suworowianus* should, in fact, be regarded as a subspecies of *C.kotschyanus* rather than a variant of *C.vallicola*.

The orange-yellow *C.scharojanii* on the other hand was found growing in very close proximity to *C.vallicola* although even here there was a slight but marked difference in habitat, with *C.scharojanii* preferring the damp peaty turf alongside mountain rivulets. Where populations of the two occurred near each other, the occasional hybrid could be found, and cytological investigations of these species has shown that, in spite of looking rather different, they are very closely allied and inter-fertile. Hybrids, however, are very rare so that it appears there must be some barrier involving the pollinating insects since the two are so different in their colour and markings. Although I was able to observe the rather intriguing mechanism of pollination in *C.vallicola* I failed to observe the process involving *C.scharojanii*. Needless to say, one seldom gets all the pieces of such a puzzle together at the same time, but this does provide excellent excuses for further visits!

In a decade of travels in search of Crocus in Turkey, I have certainly cleared up, to my own satisfaction, a number of taxonomic problems, and added a great deal of knowledge to the distribution and habitats of each species. A monograph has now been published, although this is by no means the last word which will be written on *Crocus*, for there are many outstanding questions to be answered and only an intensive programme of field studies will elucidate these. Not least is the tantalising problem of *C.boisseri* which was described as a new species in 1881 from a single incomplete dried specimen deposited in the Geneva herbarium. It is said to have been collected by the Russian explorer, P.Tchihatcheff in 1854, in southern Turkey near the cave of Corycus in Cilicia. Clearly, even from the inadequate herbarium material, it is a distinct and interesting species, but try as I might, I have been unable to find any crocus in the same region. At worst the label on the specimen could be wrong, for mistakes do occur, in which case one might be looking in completely the wrong place. However, the fact remains that this is a distinct species which has not been re-discovered and one will not rest easily until it has been tracked down.