

CROCUS GROUP BULLETIN NO. 20

Hon Secretary's Notes

This year's Crocus Group silver spoon was won by Mr & Mrs R J A Leeds with a pan of Crocus pestalozzae. Maybe a Crocus Group member will win it in 1993. [There is a new clean one each year to be won; it does not have to be given back by the previous winner.] The winner in 1991, one of our members, contributes an article on Exhibiting Crocus in this bulletin, which may spur someone into exhibiting crocuses at the A G S Spring Show 1993.

Bulbs are coming out so early this autumn, I hope this reaches you before the autumn crocuses are over.

Primrose Warburg
South Hayes
Yarnells Hill
Oxford OX2 9BG

Tel: (0865) 247883

Saturday 17 October 1992

We have been invited to visit the garden of **Brian Mathew** who is THE AUTHORITY on Crocus. He also grows a large selection of other unusual plants. His address is:- 90, FOLEY ROAD, CLAYGATE, ESHER, SURREY, telephone 0372 462538. Arrive at 11 am and he and his wife will provide somewhere for us to eat our sandwiches after we have been round the garden.

Saturday 13 February 1993

One of our members, **Dick David** has invited us to see his (small) garden in Cambridge. Afterwards I hope it will be possible to visit the nearby Cambridge Botanic Garden. After that we may eat our sandwiches back at Mr & Mrs David's house and in the afternoon we can go and visit Cambridge Bulbs, a small nursery run by Mr Stephens which specialises in unusual bulbs, including crocus. There may also be other private gardens to see on the way home - more details in the Spring newsletter and instructions about how to find Highsett. Arrive at 50 HIGHSETT, CAMBRIDGE at 11 am. Please telephone 0223 350376 if you intend to come.

Sunday 14 March 1993

We have been invited to visit the garden of Dr & Mrs P J Watt at Winchester. These two doctors grow a large variety of bulbs of all kinds, so even if we hit a day when there are few crocuses, other things will be in flower.

Address: FOUR WINDS
 10 ANDOVER ROAD NORTH
 WINCHESTER, HANTS
Tel: 0962 880050

Map will accompany Spring newsletter.

Arrive at 11 am and we can eat our packed lunches somewhere under cover when we have been round the garden.

Please remember to telephone if you intend to visit these gardens. If you have any interesting crocuses out yourself, please bring them for the rest of us to see.

Tuesday 16 March 1993

Annual Crocus Group lecture at 5 pm in RHS New Hall will be given by David Stephens, who has been responsible for the new Seed Exchange which has got off to a very successful start in spite of a poor seed-setting season. The lecture will be followed by our Annual Auction of Crocuses. Please support this as it provides the essential cash which keeps the group going. If you cannot come yourself, please try and send us some spare corms to sell.

Title of lecture will appear in Spring newsletter - just make a note of the date.

EXHIBITING CROCUS

John Grimshaw's article on "Crocus in the Alpine House" set me thinking how different his approach is to mine. Perhaps I am biased, having come into bulbs after exhibiting alpines on the AGS show benches, but the objective of exhibiting Crocus seemed to me to be rewarding, in that many people would see their delightful flowers (after all, only botanists look at their leaves). Consequently, mine are in 'captivity' indefinitely, as it takes some years to build up a good potful, the more so for the rarities which, I believe, would be very risky in the garden.

The common thread between us is that we both grow Crocus and I am certain we both enjoy the challenge, but the wider issue of getting more people to have the persistence and skills to cultivate the challenging ones (or 'feeble' as John describes them) is a worthy cause in these days of habitat destruction.

The best advice for anyone wishing to get into Crocus cultivation is to start with the easier species and experience success, then go onto others that gradually present a greater challenge. One might now ask for a list of degree of difficulty, which will not be forthcoming, but one must approach the venture with a degree of standardisation, being prepared by increasing experience and a flexible attitude to vary the approach if things are not well. Hands-on cultivation in clay pots is the way forward.

Where did I start? According to my records, *C. hadriaticus* arrived first (1984), with *C. cancellatus cancellatus*, *C. korolkowii*, *C. angustifolius* and *C. minimus*. All of these suffered badly in the first few years due, in the main I think, to inappropriate composts and too much water. I still only have five bulbs of the original *hadriaticus*; *minimus* was indeed put in the garden to recover and has done well and *angustifolius* is lost, so persistence is important.

My current compost is two parts 1/8 grit, two parts J12 (a reliable brand is important, labelled John Innes Manufacturer's Association) with one part sieved sphagnum peat and one part Kettering loam. I reinforce this with a good measure of bonemeal and plant the bulbs a third to half way up the pot, depending on their size related to depth of pot. My first attempts were all planted too shallow and this allows the bulbs to dry out and die in Summer. I have given up 'baking' bulbs, as I don't think this happens in nature and I try to keep them 'just damp' (whatever that means) whilst they are dormant. By adopting this outline, I seem to be getting a progressive increase in size and number year by year.

Oddly enough, one of my first buys was *C. scardicus* which, because it grows in damper, turfy conditions, I planted in my Asiatic Primula compost. It has never looked back!

Well, you may say that my experience doesn't follow my advice, but this is how it happened for me, and I have tried to get as much as possible on the show bench. Timing for shows has always been difficult and I can provide no advice other than to go on a percentage basis, ie if you have enough pots, some are bound to be in flower!

I know exhibiting is not everyone's cup of tea, but a well grown pot of *C. corsicus* or *C. imperati* is very satisfying to grower and viewer alike, so let's grow more in pots and build up our skills, to see more *C. leichtlinii*, *C. biflorus* *crewei*, *C. pelistericus* or any other that you consider rare for whatever reason.

D G KING
20. 8. 92

CROCUS VARIETIES AND CULTIVARS.

The first article on this subject appeared in Bulletin No.17 and covered the autumn-flowering species. The cultivars of Crocus sieberi were dealt with in Bulletin No.18. So we continue with the other spring-flowering species.

Crocus vernus.

I shall not attempt to describe the large Dutch crocuses derived from Crocus vernus ssp. vernus, as I do not grow them. Mention must be made, however, of CC. heuffelianus and scepusiensis, which are now included in C. vernus ssp. vernus. Many gardeners and many of our Eastern European friends are reluctant to drop these names which have been applied to Eastern forms of the species usually with dark markings on the tips of the perianth segments. I was never happy about distinguishing one from the other, since the presence of throat hairs does not seem to be a constant factor. So-called Crocus vernus graecus is apparently a form of heuffelianus and has nothing to do with Greece. It would be nice to have a cultivar name for the dark-tipped plants, though I suspect that the botanists would be unhappy with Crocus vernus 'Heuffelianus'.

Whilst I have no strong feelings about these Eastern forms, I do admit to feeling sad that the var. siculus has not been retained. This Sicilian form, now merged into C. vernus ssp. albiflorus, seems to me to be distinct in the shape of the flower, which has a well-defined waist. Also, in this garden, it is a more vigorous plant than C. vernus albiflorus from the Alps. Like many C. vernus forms, it has "escaped" here and I never know where it will pop up. Dr. John Marr introduced a number of colour forms which I am trying to round up for the collection.

Crocus tommasinianus.

All the plants I have seen of known wild origin have been a fairly uniform lavender with grey exterior. A number of colour-forms exists in garden populations and since, on a light soil, these will self-sow, a bewildering variety results. The plants themselves are indestructible but alas their labels are not and it is difficult to assign some cultivar names with any confidence.

'Albus' covers a range of white forms, some with narrow flimsy "petals", some with faint mauve flecks on the outer segments. I have isolated some particularly good white seedlings which have appeared, though I can give no guarantees that some hybridisation with Crocus vernus has not occurred.

'Whitewell Purple' is a deep purple cultivar and I still have a colony derived from one of the first crocuses I ever bought.

'Taplow Ruby', alas, I have lost, or more probably, it is

hiding in anonymity amongst dozens of other forms. If any reader of these notes can furnish me with a bona fide plant, my gratitude would be almost boundless.

Mr. Bowles and Mr. Oliver Wyatt both gave me C. tommasinianus 'Roseus' which is a good clear pink with silvery outsides to the outer segments. There are other pink forms which are uniformly coloured. A deep wine-red cultivar I have distributed as 'Claret', but an apparently identical plant is carrying the name 'Oliver Wyatt'. 'Claret' has dark, almost black, tips to the "petals" and the colour becomes bluish towards the throat. 'Pictus' has a lavender flower, paler on the outside and with a white tip, with a purple blotch below the tip. Plants resembling 'Pictus' arise spontaneously in the garden populations, but have subtle differences in the marking at the tip. 'Bobbo' has a white tip but no purple marking and I am grateful to Group members who have donated corms of this to the collection.

Crocus etruscus.

The cultivar most commonly encountered in the garden is 'Zwanenburg'. This is clearly a selection made for its vigour. It is slightly larger than the usual wild plants, but lacks the external feathering which is an attractive feature in most forms of this species. It is, of course, named after the Van Tubergen nursery at Haarlem.

Crocus "Cambridge".

Before moving on from the vernus group, mention must be made of a mystery crocus for which I suggest the cultivar name of 'Cambridge'. I received this from Cambridge Botanic Garden many years ago as Crocus ? biliottii. Its reticulate tunic distinguishes it from C. biliottii, now C. aeriis, and its identity has not been definitely established. The plant was found growing in the Botanic Garden and its wild provenance is not known. The flower is violet, rather more slender and distinctly smaller than C. vernus ssp. vernus. It is a fairly vigorous garden plant, late-flowering and is indeed one of the last species to flower. I have been struck by its similarity to C. kosaninii which, however, has a distinctive yellow throat, which 'Cambridge' has not. We may never be able to complete its botanical pedigree, but it is a very worth-while garden plant and I think a cultivar name is justifiable.

Crocus imperati.

Several white forms of this species are in cultivation and the cultivar names 'Albus' and 'Albiflos' have been used. I am not sure which is which and some forms have flowers of poor substance. There is, however, a good cultivar with solid white

flowers which retains the buff exterior coloration. A very striking and easily grown cultivar is variously known as 'De Jager's variety', 'De Jager', 'Jageri' and 'Monophyllus'. As the last name suggests, it has a monophyllous spathe or, to use modern nomenclature, there is a bract but no bracteole. This feature, though of no horticultural significance, means that the plant resembles subspecies *suaveolens*. It may be a form or a hybrid of this subspecies. It has deep violet segments with a strong buff colour on the prominent purple stripes. Another characteristic is its very early flowering, several weeks before wild *C. imperati* ssp. *suaveolens* in this garden.

Crocus corsicus and *minimus*.

These two species from Corsica and Sardinia are variable in the wild and it is perhaps surprising that the commercially available selections have not been given cultivar names. The clone of *C. minimus* with its rather long-tubed flowers and almost solid blotches of reddish-purple on the outer segments is by no means typical of the species which often exhibits clearly defined stripes and featherings. White forms of both species are known. A white form of *C. corsicus* with a yellowish suffusion on the outside was, I think, distributed from Highdown and in my view is one of the most beautiful of all white crocuses. It perhaps deserves a cultivar name since seedlings I have raised from it have all been white, but lack the yellow outside and are not nearly as attractive.

Crocus biflorus.

I approach the *biflorus* group with the greatest of misgivings and knowing that a number of named cultivars have slipped through my fingers over the years. The *biflorus* cultivars can be divided simplistically into two groups.....striped flowers and unstriped flowers. The striped group is presumably derived mainly from *C. biflorus* ssp. *biflorus* and the unstriped ones are referable to *C. biflorus* ssp. *weldenii*. When I first started to grow crocuses, the form most commonly available from bulb merchants was a large-flowered, sterile clone popularly known as the "Scotch Crocus". The flowers were white with five prominent purple stripes on the outside. I have not seen this form for years, although I feel sure it must still be in existence, as it was a strong-growing variety. More recently, I was given corms from a naturalised colony of *C. biflorus* ssp. *biflorus* which was threatened by impending development of its site. I expected it to be the "Scotch Crocus", but it proved to have pale lilac flowers, though it approached the "Scotch Crocus" in size. I think that some members of the Crocus Group may be able to throw light on the whereabouts of the "Scotch Crocus" and its relationship to the naturalised colonies.

The only other striped cultivar represented in the collection is 'Argenteus' which is an altogether smaller form with lilac flowers and is probably the same plant described under that name by Bowles. If so, it is of Italian origin and is a fairly robust garden plant.

Cultivars allied to or derived from C. biflorus ssp. weldenii do not have yellow throats and are unstriped, though they may have exterior flecking or blotches. Pure white forms are available as 'Albus' and 'White Lady'. A popular cultivar with external blue stippling is 'Fairy'. Similar, but with deeper external coloration, is 'Kittiwake', said to have 13 chromosomes and so is sterile and probably a hybrid. This plant is rare in cultivation. Equally rare is a plant I received as C. weldenii 'Sulphur form'. It is pale lemon yellow with a varying amount of blue flecking on the outside. I have always thought that it might be a chrysanthus x weldenii hybrid and this is implied in Bowles' writing. However, I have been told that pale yellow forms of C. weldenii are known in the wild. Whatever the origin, it is a beautiful cultivar and I am trying, in the interests of conservation, to pass on corms to other growers.

Cultivars of the yellow flowered species will be the subject of a further article.

RAY COBB

18. 8. 92