



Crocus Group Bulletin No. 39

July 2010

Patron Brian Mathew MBE VMH

Members 177

Committee David Stephens

Alan Edwards

Hon. Sec. Tony Goode

Hon Sec notes: Welcome to the summer newsletter. As I write these notes I have a crocus in flower, *Crocus biflorus* ssp *alexandrii*. How is this possible in July here in an East of England heatwave? It is possible thanks to the generosity of a CG member in the southern hemisphere. When will the next flowering be?

In February an e-newsletter was sent out to 149 members who have signed up for this service. Thanks to all of you for signing up, only 28 newsletters to print out this time. Cheaper and quicker!

As always I will be delighted to receive pictures, short accompanying notes (or full length articles) by email or on CD/DVD. It is your newsletter, please contribute if you can. Even pictures of common taxa will be of interest, for example the variation in the ubiquitous *Crocus vernus* would keep us going for years! Send your contributions to: Tony Goode, 3 Woodland Road, Hellesdon, Norwich. NR6 5RA. UK.

Email to: tonyg@thealpinehouse.fsnet.co.uk this address copes with large email attachments. The address in the last newsletter is for correspondence only. **TG**

Crocus Group Seed Exchange

The aim of the seed exchange is to get *Crocus* seed to members as close as possible to the correct time for them to be sown for optimal germination. *Crocus* seed has been shown to germinate best if sown during the higher temperatures of late summer before the lower temperatures of autumn and winter initiate germination. The best time for sowing is therefore at the same time as nature does it in the wild, that is when the ripe seed is expelled from the mature seedpod in late spring to early summer. For this reason we ask donors to send seed as soon as possible after they have collected it, and in any case before 31st of July.

During the first week of August a seed list is compiled and sent to members who have requested a copy by sending a stamped addressed envelope, or an e-mail request, again before the 31st of July. Overseas members should not stamp the envelope but it would be best to use e-mail.

Members should indicate on the seed list request form which seeds they want up to a limit of 30 packets, and the form should be returned before the 31st of August. About the 1st week of September the seeds are divided between the members who request them, **with donors getting first choice**, although non donors always get a good deal. You will receive your seeds within a few weeks after that. They should be sown immediately and left exposed to the weather until they germinate, after which they may be brought under cover.

Donations of seed and requests for seed should be sent, before 31st July to: -
David Stephens, 76 South Terrace, Dorking, Surrey. RH4 2AQ, UK.
or for an e-mailed seed list to:

thecrocusgroup@hotmail.com

To recap:**Rule 1.** If you are a donor, send seed before 31st July**Rule 2.** If you are not a donor but want a seed list, send a SAE or e-mail before 31st July

Obviously, donors always get first choice and very rare seed in short supply invariably goes to them. However, non-donors receive a fair proportion of what they ask for and always get a good deal.

Some statistics last four years:

Year	No. of <i>Crocus</i> group members	No. of members requesting seed list	No. of members donating seed	No. of seed pots offered	No. of <i>Crocus</i> taxa represented
2009	184	70 (38%)	29 (16%)	138	79
2008	184	61 (33%)	28 (15%)	110	65
2007	166	61 (37%)	27 (16%)	148	74
2006	153	64 (42%)	26 (17%)	159	73

The *Crocus* Group seed exchange has been very successful and instrumental in getting most of the known *Crocus* taxa into cultivation. When I managed to persuade Primrose Warburg to allow the first seed exchange in 1992, it was very difficult to get hold of many *Crocus* taxa, even some of those we would consider fairly common by today's standards.

One of my frustrations as curator of the exchange over the years has been that for the rarer taxa there are never enough seeds to make more than just a few packets. Obviously, most members request these so most will not receive them. These are distributed by a blind draw among the donors. Very occasionally there are enough rare seeds to allow everyone to have a packet such as with *Crocus michelsonii* in 2007. However, even with such small numbers of seed available these rare taxa are becoming slowly more widely grown. These last few years has seen the distribution of small quantities of *Crocus wattiorum* so in a few years time hopefully this will be more widely grown.

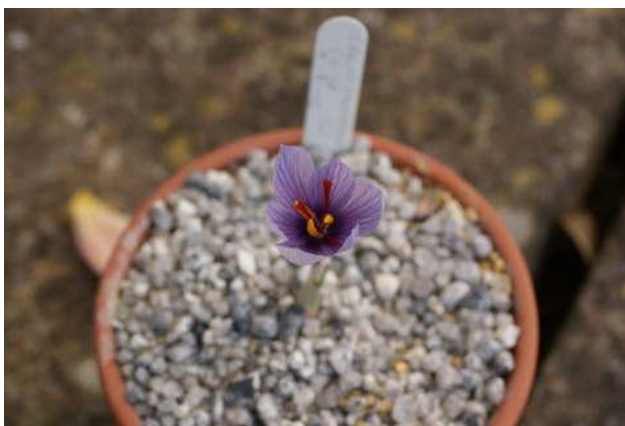
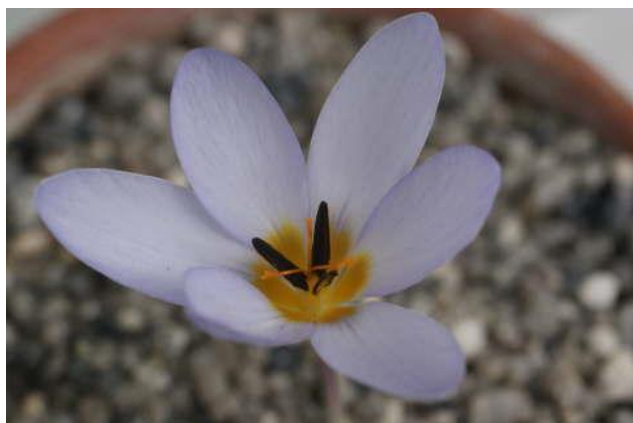
Can I urge members to make an effort to try to get seeds from their plants and to swap them in the seed exchange; this is one of the major ways to increase their availability and your collection. It can be difficult to get *Crocus* seed set in bad growing seasons particularly on the spring taxa. But, if while you are examining your flowering pots you carry a paint brush or similar implement, you can assist nature by becoming a pollinator.

Growing bulbous plants from seed does not seem to occur to a lot of otherwise good growers. Perhaps it is the fact that you have to wait a few years before you see a flower that deters. However, other than this, the process is extremely easy, just sow *Crocus* seed halfway down a pot of seed compost during late summer, expose to all weathers until germination then put under some protection from excess cold and water logging. Keep on the dry side over the late spring and summer then repeat the process. A few years doing this and you will have the pleasure each year of seeing new flowering pots of *Crocus* of your own making. **S**

Notes on *Crocus nerimaniae* and *Crocus wattiorum* – Ian Robertson.

Herewith some photos of *C.nerimaniae* (first three) and *C. Wattiorum* (last one). I received the seed from Peter and Penny Watt - 10 seeds of each - and they were both sown on 13/9/06. The compost was basically 1:1:1 JI2, peat and grit, with some extra grit added. Because I was told that *C.nerimaniae* grows on serpentine I used lime free JI2 and added a little epsom salts, and similarly because *C.wattiorum* grows in limestone rocks I used normal JI2 with some lime added. This may well not be necessary, but I was feeling my way and trying to replicate the natural growing conditions as far as possible. I always cover the compost with a thin layer of grit sand, partly because the gritsand is fairly sterile, but principally because I station sow my seed and that way I can see what I am doing. I then cover the seed with chick grit, and place the pots on a pathway between a shed and a fence where they get a few hours morning sun. Of the ten seeds of *C.nerimaniae*, seven germinated, and of the ten *C.wattiorum*, six germinated. After the leaves had died down I moved the pots to the sand plunge in a net-sided polytunnel where they remained until August 2008 when they were repotted, each species together into 12cm clay pots using the same composts as before. The sand plunge is fairly dry in summer but damp from autumn through to spring, and the pots get a watering from time to time once the leaves appear. In October 2009, three years from sowing, There were still seven *C.nerimaniae*, of which four flowered, and six *C.wattiorum* of which two flowered. I think I may have lost one *C.nerimaniae* over the winter, but the rest look all right so far. It is

probably all due to beginner's luck, but basically there don't seem to be too many problems, and I hope I can increase the stock enough to try them in the garden, as I am quite hopeful of *C. nerimaniae* in particular.



Notes from a National Collection – Roger Holland

In the *Crocus Group Bulletin* no 34 (Summer 2006) I wrote of building up a collection of crocuses on behalf of the E A Bowles of Myddelton House Society. It consisted of cvs of *Cc. chrysanthus* and *biflorus*, a group for which no National Collection existed then. At the time of writing we had applied to NCCPG (now Plant Heritage) to have it registered as a National Collection. This is an update on what has happened in the meantime.

We were granted Full National Collection status in February 2007. At that time we had 45 identified cvs and another 19 stocks which were possible duplicates or with identities still not confirmed. We are now up to 60 confirmed cvs but some of those earlier stocks still present problems. One is 'Uschak Orange'. In my earlier report I said I had seen colour variation within both stocks received under this name. It was not enough to be obvious at a casual glance but careful observation showed definite differences in stigma and perianth colour. Records were taken from individual plants. They were then carefully labelled and separated out at repotting. Colour differences noted at the first flowering were found to be perpetuated in later seasons so the stocks were clearly mixed. This raises the question of which one is the original 'Uschak Orange'. I have been unable to find a good early description or photograph to help resolve the matter. It is even possible that the stocks were always mixed. The name was given to material collected in the field near Uschak in Turkey. If the material given this name consisted of several collected corms rather than a single one some variation is quite on the cards. Given the time that has elapsed it is difficult to sort the matter out now, but if anyone has any information which might help I should be very grateful for it.

Another issue I mentioned in the earlier report was the health of present day stocks of 'Ladykiller'. Most flowers show some distortion of perianth segments, possibly due to virus. There is currently a trial of spring-flowered *Crocus* taking place at Wisley and the 'Ladykiller' in that is showing typical distortion. The committee assessing the trial will have to decide whether the AGM it currently holds should be retained but there must be a question mark over it. In my experience there is variation between plants in extent of the

distortion and I have been trying to select 'clean' material from stocks bought from two different sources. After two seasons of roguing things are looking better but it remains to be seen whether the problem can be eradicated. Recently I received a corm from Timothy Clark at Soham. It was from a stock he bought about 55 years ago and it will be interesting to see whether the flowers on that show the distortion.

As with all National Collections, some of the cultivars are very fine and well worth growing while others are simply there for the sake of completeness. Among those added in recent years the most appealing is 'Willem van Eeden', given by Cees Breed. It is similar to 'Skyline' in having mid blue longitudinal stripes on an almost white ground, but differs in having a purplish blotch at the base of the outer segments and a yellow throat. It is also much more vigorous and shows considerable potential as a garden plant. On the other hand, 'Brassband' is large and floppy and is only likely to appeal if you have a taste for brown flowers.

Some cultivars continue to elude us, notably 'E A Bowles'. When I last wrote we thought a stock found by Elizabeth Parker-Jervis might be it: unfortunately it turned out to be 'Romance'. Last year I located in the National History Museum a painting of this cultivar done by Bowles himself. Until then the precise appearance was not clear. That hurdle is now overcome, all we have to do is find the plant itself. If anyone has anything under this name and it doesn't look like 'E P Bowles' (most do) I should be very pleased to hear from them. The same thing applies to *C. biflorus weldenii* 'Albus'. It still appears on lists from time to time but nothing I have yet seen remotely matches the description.

In the last *Crocus Group Bulletin* (no 37) there was a very useful, if worrying, article by Janis Ruksans on bacterial and fungal diseases affecting *Crocus*. It is something we all need to be aware of, as I discovered in spring 2008. I noticed leaves discolouring far too early and some of the later cultivars started to deteriorate even before flowers opened. A sample was sent off to the RHS but they took over six weeks to provide a tentative diagnosis, far too long to be of any practical use. Fortunately I was still in touch with a plant pathologist former colleague who identified *Pythium* in a few days. This was potentially devastating to the collection but, as I have professional horticultural experience, he was able to let me have a small amount of a fungicide that stopped it in its tracks. It couldn't regrow dead roots though and corm harvest was much poorer than usual. To me the infection demonstrated two things. Firstly, it is important to inspect regularly for any sign of disease and immediately isolate or destroy anything showing symptoms. The old maxim of 'watch and pray' is still applicable as, given the lack of fungicides, 'watch and spray' isn't usually an option. The second point is the desirability of having a backup collection. In our case, another member of the Bowles Society holds small numbers of most stocks. Thanks to that we only lost two cultivars.

The *Pythium* problem also made me rethink some of my cultivation methods. I improved drainage in the frame. There is now a layer of pea gravel under the sand the pots stand on and separated from it by a permeable membrane. There is therefore little chance of disease rising from the soil below. I always repotted everything in fresh compost annually. Now I don't just wash the used pots but soak them in dilute bleach before reusing. I also drench the frame with Jeyes Fluid before anything goes back in. However, I still couldn't understand where the *Pythium* had come from in the first place and asked my pathologist friend. He told me the pathogen can affect quite a range of plants and an infected leaf from something else may have found its way into the rainwater butt. From there I would have been the agent which spread it throughout the frame - a really galling thought. Given what was at stake I felt this was a situation where being green must take second place to practicality and I now only use tapwater.

In our Summer 2008 *Bulletin* (no 36) Tony Goode mentions decline in vigour of old *Crocus* stocks and the desirability of rejuvenating them from seed periodically. It's a very good principle but unfortunately can't be used on cultivars. The name is given to a particular clone and there is no guarantee it will breed true from seed. This is unfortunate as some of the old cultivars are quite a struggle to keep going. An example is 'Kittiwake', one of the range of *chrysanthus/biflorus* cvs E A Bowles raised and named after birds. Unlike its sister 'Snow Bunting', which is still in rude good health after 80 or so years, 'Kittiwake' is a poor thing and I'm sure Bowles would not have considered it worth naming as it is now. 'Blue Jay', another of the bird series, is even miffier and to the best of my knowledge the few corms Niels Jacobsen has in Denmark constitute the entire world stock. We are investigating the possibility of micropropagating 'Kittiwake'. The technique uses only a few cells from the growing tip of the plant. These are usually free of viruses, so we

may be able to restore it to its original state. The project is still very much in its early stages but could prove a lifeline for important old cultivars.

A further development in the collection took place recently. In August Plant Heritage approved our application to extend its scope to include all *Crocus* cvs raised by E A Bowles. So far as I can tell there are only six still around that weren't covered by the original *chrysanthus/biflorus* remit. They are:

- C. korolkowii 'Dytiscus'
- C. x jessopae
- C. sieberi 'Albus' (syn 'Bowles's White')
- C. tommasinianus 'Pictus', 'Roseus' and 'Bobbo'

Of these, the commercial stocks of 'Pictus' and 'Roseus' don't match Bowles' descriptions. I think I may be able to obtain true material of the former but the latter is a problem. Bowles described it as, "Almost the colour of peach blossom", scarcely true of what we now see under that name. I would like to hear from anyone who has a stock corresponding to the description. Likewise, does anyone know of the existence of any other Bowles-raised *Croci* (to use his plural)? It would be good to be able to include at least one autumn flowerer and I recently came across a reference, written in 1916, to *C. speciosus* 'Bowles' White'. If these notes seem like one long appeal for plants I apologise, but how else will we be able to add to the collection?

One final note about a further plan for the future. Myddelton House, Bowles' home, recently received a Heritage Lottery Fund award to restore the Kitchen Garden and develop a Visitor Centre. A dynamic new Head Gardener has been appointed to spearhead the project and three months later improvements to the rest of the garden are already apparent. The Kitchen Garden is where Bowles had his extensive *Crocus* frames and beds and the Head Gardener is keen to re-establish them in part. He also wants to develop a parallel collection to the one we hold. We look forward to supporting him in this: after all, there is something very appealing about the thought that for quite a few of our charges this will be a return home.

Crocus in Crete

John Richards reported on *Crocus* in Crete in his excellent Northumberland Diary. This can be found on the AGS website. My attempts at copying the article were confounded by technology however you can read the report and view the pictures on the AGS website using the following link:

<http://www.alpinegardensociety.net/diaries/Northumberland/+November+/234/>

A newly described subspecies of *Crocus biflorus*

Crocus biflorus subsp. *caricus* Kernd. & Pasche---is a basically white--colored subspecies with purple--striped backs of the flower segments, known from several localities in Caria, south--western Turkey, where it is locally abundant. It is somewhat similar to subsp. *crewei*, but differs in more numerous, though smaller leaves and distinct bronze--brown blotches in the yellow throat. In some forms the throat at the base is dark red--brown becoming orange and then yellow at the top. The filaments are very long and brown--violet throughout. So it will not be difficult to identify this subspecies. In the wild it grows on both calciferous and non--calciferous formations, where can be found on margins of pine forests, sometimes among or under *Castanea sativa*. In the wild it grows on both non--calcareous and calcareous soils. **JR**

Some *Crocus* seen on the SRGC Forum this spring

Many interesting and unusual *crocus* have been seen this spring. Some of them are illustrated below with the growers names. Thanks for their permission – all are *Crocus* Group members.



Crocus veluchensis x *cvijicii* Rainbow Gold - Dirk Schnabel (DS)



Crocus sieberi sublimis x *gargaricus* - DS



Crocus siehianus – 10 years from a single corm



Crocus hartmannianus - DS



Crocus x bornmuelleri ex wild seed and next generation of cultivation - DS



Crocus heuffelianus Snow Princess - DS



Crocus aerius albus- DS



Pelistericus Tony Willis

Crocus cultivars planted along a Norwich roadside in 2000 have produced some very attractive seedlings in the last few years. Many thousands of corms were planted (using the common cultivars) in small clumps. The offspring are not always improvements on the original planting but some are exceptional. I am aware that some gardeners have found similar hybrids among their plantings. **TG**



Some of the spontaneous hybrids along Earlham Road, Norwich