

CROCUS GROUP NEWSLETTER No. 49: Spring 2018

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From the Editor

Members from Northern Europe will be well aware that the 2017-18 winter has been a horror. I write on 18 March looking out over a snow-covered landscape for about the sixth time: the experience wore thin some months ago. Between snowfalls it has been largely grey and wet, with very little sunshine. Here in North Yorkshire we haven't had any of those delightful winter days when it warms up sufficiently for the snowdrops and crocuses to open wide, and bees fly – and one feels that spring can't be far away. Instead the crocuses have managed to half open a few times, but they've mostly looked rather sad and weather-beaten. There have certainly been some lovely images of crocuses on social media this year so I hope that others have had better weather and that there will be some seeds to send to the Group's Seed Distribution.

Please let myself or Mat Murray (currently revelling in the crocuses of western Turkey) have articles, notes or images for future issues of the Crocus Group Bulletin.

John Grimshaw

IMPORTANT

The adoption of the EU General Data Protection Regulations in May this year means that we need your permission to store your contact data for the purpose of communicating with you about the activities of the Crocus Group through its Newsletter and Seed Exchange. Personal data is kept securely by the officers and is never shared.

Please take a moment to reply to this email to state that you are willing to allow the Crocus Group to retain your contact information for these purposes. Unfortunately we will not be able to communicate with you after May if we do not receive your permission to do so.

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Notes on some autumn-flowering Crocus from north-western Greece.

John Richards, Hexham.

As a long-time habitu  of the Greek Peloponnese in late autumn, I have on occasion wondered how the rest of Greece fares for late-flowering crocus and other bulbs. The Peloponnese boasts seven autumn-flowering crocus species, but only three of these, *C. goulimyi*, *C. niveus* and *C. melantherus* are endemic there. So what of the other four Peloponnesian autumnal species? Of these, *C. cancellatus* is the most widespread. In Greece, it occurs as subspecies *mazziaricus* and seems to have a rather easterly trend to its distribution. It may be under-recorded. On the southern slopes of Parnon it grows in a *niveus*-like form, but with highly divided styles.

C. laevigatus is restricted to Greece, where it is widespread through southern Attica, the Cyclades, Crete and the southern Peloponnesos (Fig. 1). Interestingly there is an isolated record from the Parnassos district (Tan & Iatrou, 2001).

C. boryi, a close relative of *C. laevigatus*, has an almost linear distribution from Corfu in the north-west, south-easterly through the Ionian islands to western and southern Peloponnese, and again in eastern Crete. There are two mainland sites in western Attica, opposite Cephalonia (Fig. 2).

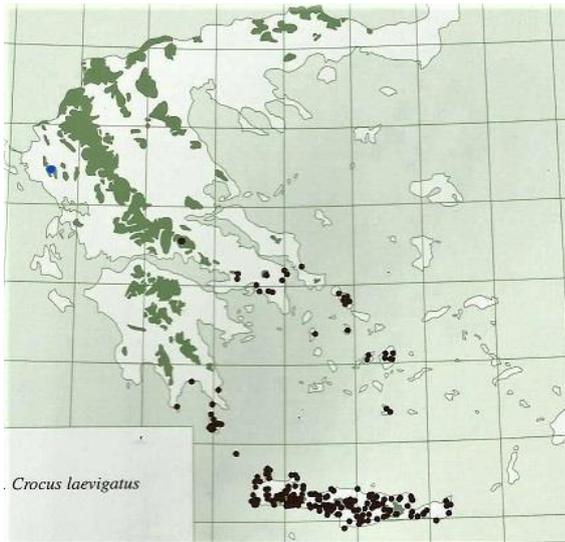


Figure 1. Distribution of *C. laevigatus*

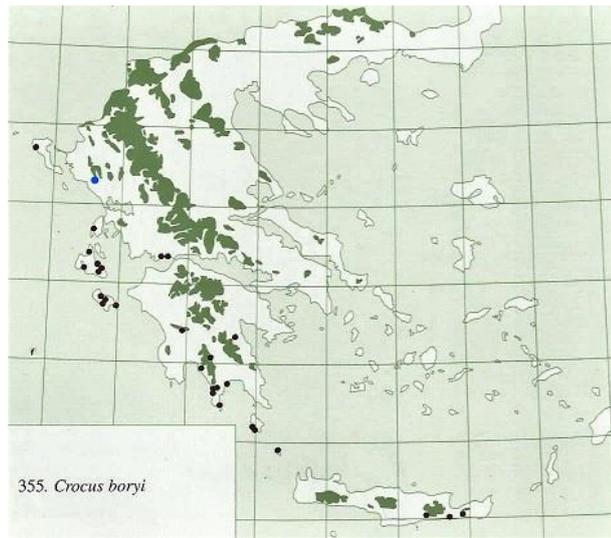


Figure 2. Distribution of *C. boryi*

Fourthly, *C. hadriaticus* is thinly distributed down western Greece from Corfu (again) to the southern Peloponnesian Mani (Fig. 3). North of Pelops, its only mainland site seems to be in the region of remote Tomaros, south-west of Ioannina. There is however a distinct subspecies, *parnassicus*, on Parnassos.

Consequently, when we planned a late October holiday to Parga, on the north-western coast of the Greek mainland south-east of Corfu in 2017, I didn't really expect to find any crocuses. However, in my most optimistic frame of mind I thought there was a slight chance that we might find *C. boryi* or *C. hadriaticus*, although I could find no published records of either from anywhere near to Parga. *C. cancellatus* seemed another faint possibility. There were also two other slender leads concerning non-Peloponnesian species. Ruksans (2013) describes a highly disjunct form of *Crocus speciosus* from the Vikos gorge, NW Greece, as subspecies *hellenicus*. Other Greek localities were listed for Etoloakarnania and Fokida, i.e. in the southern Pindus (see also Phitos et al., 2009).

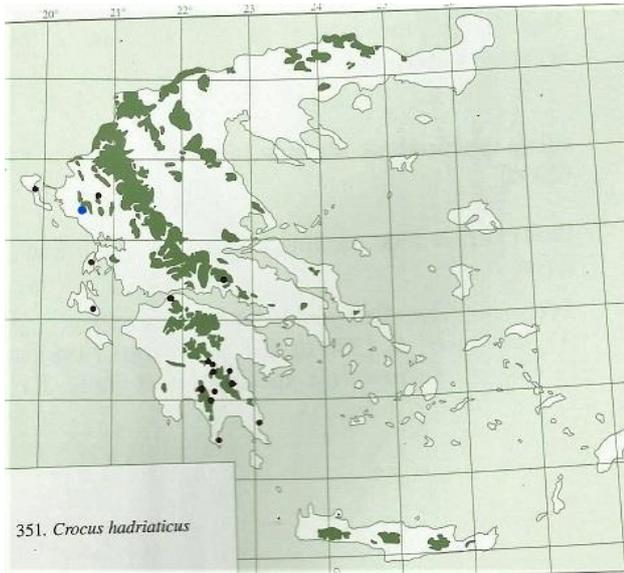


Figure 3. Distribution of *C. hadriaticus*



Figure 4. Distribution of *C. robertianus*

Finally, there was the enigma that is *Crocus robertianus*; enigmatic because most reports of this rare endemic list only two disjunct localities; between Ioannina and Trikkala (i.e. in the northern Pindus), and east of Nafpaktos in the southern Pindus not far from the south mainland coast. It was not until after our return that I discovered that a more recent edition of Phitos et al. (2009) than the one I own gives several more sites, including one near Mt. Thesprotika, about 25 km east of Parga (Fig. 4).

In the event, finding autumn-flowering crocus in the Parga district proved much easier and more varied than in my most optimistic dreams. On our first day out we found three species in the first morning! In retrospect we were extremely fortunate that day, as it had not rained for four months and autumn bulbs were very late to flower and then in small numbers. I suspect we would have found many more sites in November that year, or during October in other years. Great masses of *Cyclamen hederifolium* were only reaching their peak as we left at the end of October 2017.

Our first discovery was at the Acheron springs, where a few *Crocus boryi* were flowering on a steep shaded roadbank (Fig. 5) (all our finds were north-facing on grassy banks in partial shade, usually characterised by numerous flowering *Bellis sylvestris* and various yellow hawkbits and hawksbeards). We returned to this site a week later, to find a few more, but the total number of plants did not exceed 20.

Just north of this site at Gliki, a road branches in a north-easterly direction and climbs sharply into Souli territory. It then drops down to the river via a series of bends, and on one of the terraces above the road I found a single flower that I was immediately convinced was *Crocus laevigatus*. Ten days later, after heavy rain, we returned to this site and found a scattered population of perhaps 100 plants on both sides of the road. (Fig. 6)

I am not wholly confident of the identity of this population. It is entirely white-flowered, and only a few individuals showed slight feathering. As in the Peloponnesos (where most *C. laevigatus* are also white and unfeathered or scarcely so) it can be difficult to separate *C. laevigatus* from small *C. boryi*. Typically, the latter has a much larger flower of a different shape, a much longer, narrower corolla tube, redder stigmas and more leaves but intermediates do occur, and it is possible that they hybridise in the south Parnon region of the Peloponnese. It is frequently said that the smooth, nut-like tunic of the corm of *C.*



Fig. 5. *Crocus boryi*, Acheron springs



Fig. 6. *Crocus ?laevigatus*, Souli road.

laevigatus is unmistakable, but I find it difficult to distinguish the corms of these two species when repotting. However, if this Souli population is *C. boryi*, it is far smaller, with a much shorter tube and fewer leaves (2-3) than any population I have ever encountered. The chromosome number of these two species differs, and it may be necessary to bring it into cultivation before its identification is clinched. For the time being I believe it represents a west-north-westwards extension of the known range of *C. laevigatus* by some 140km.

We continued across the river and then south to Souli (which seems to exist more as a romantic concept than a village). The Souliot centre and museum is in fact at a small village called Samonida. Here a small road climbs a short way to end at a church situated on a spectacular limestone spur. On flat ground before the church grew a diverse mix of bulbs (a large population of *Sternbergia sicula* was just finishing flower), and here we found a single flower of *Crocus hadriaticus*, unmistakable with its yellow throat, brown-stained tube and well-developed leaves (Fig. 7). We did not return here, but I expect that the population was only just starting into flower.

To prove that these were not isolated occurrences, in the second week we stumbled across a splendid site immediately north of Milokokia cemetery (about 18 km north of Parga). Here we found quite a large mixed population of *C. boryi* and *C. hadriaticus* (Fig. 8). Both species are recorded from the island of Lefkas some 70 km to the south and from the island of Corfu about the same distance north. The Tomaros station for the latter species is about equally distant.

During our visit we used the new Igoumenitsa to Trikkala motorway to pay brief visits to the Vikos gorge, and to the Katara pass, both familiar stamping grounds. The latter site had descended into full winter dormancy and yielded nothing. However, at the Vikos gorge above Monodendron we struck gold, almost literally as we walked down a wood through sheets of flowering *Sternbergia angustifolia*. At the bottom was what Ruksans calls a Yaila and I call a large doline, and here we found two patches of *Crocus speciosus* near the woodland edge (Figs 9,10). Serendipity indeed!

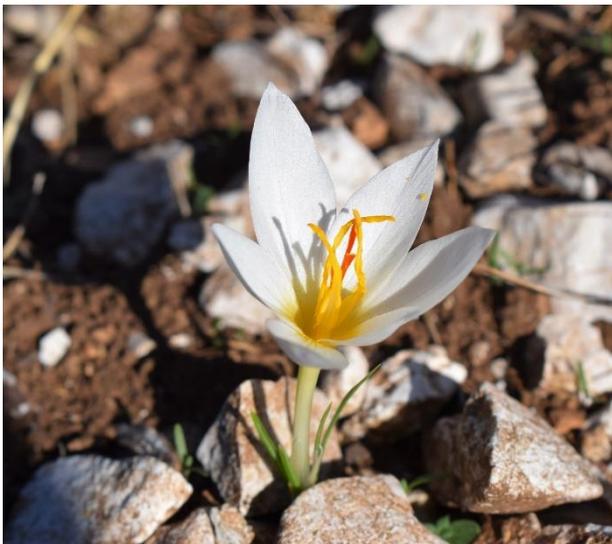


Fig. 7. *Crocus hadriaticus*, Samonida.



Fig. 8. *Crocus hadriaticus*, Milokokia.

Janis Ruksans has created, or accepts, a very large number of new crocus taxa for which he has at times been criticised. He only differentiates subspecies *hellenicus* from subspecies *speciosus* by what seem to be minor differences of the corm, and narrower leaves. Certainly, plants we found looked very like familiar garden forms of *Crocus speciosus*.



Figs. 9 and 10. *Crocus speciosus* subsp. *hellenicus*. Vikos gorge.

Four species down, but we still had one more discovery to make. During the first week we stumbled on a single crocus on a roadside below a village not far to the east of Parga (Fig. 11). With a yellow throat, brown tube staining, yellow anthers and undivided style branches, this fairly closely resembled some *C. hadriaticus* we had found, but with one important exception; there was no sign of any leaves, whereas *C. hadriaticus* invariably presents well-developed leaves at flowering. I toyed with the possibility that this represented a form of *C. cancellatus*, but that species always has finely divided style branches. On our final morning, curiosity got the better of me and we returned to the site. Fortunately a few more plants had come into flower, including one magnificent specimen with twin flowers of an opalescent palest blue (Fig. 12). And now the penny dropped! The undivided style branches bore swollen fimbriate red stigmas typical of *C. robertianus*. I was really delighted, as this was a species I had long hoped to find. The few plants we found were left for others to find, but I did excavate as far as the corm of one individual, to reveal a coarsely netted outer tunic.



Figure 11. *C. robertianus*. The first discovery.

Fig. 12. *C. robertianus*. Magnificent twins!

To summarise: although we had not really expected to find any autumn crocus in the Parga district of north-western Greece, in the event we found four species, and a fifth in the Vikos gorge 80 km to the NE. As it had been a very dry late autumn, we would expect to find far more plants and populations in a more favourable season. Clearly, more exploration is badly needed, but the potential of this area in late October would seem almost comparable to that of the fashionable Peloponnesos (we also found five colchicums and three sternbergias which have no relevance here). It seems that few botanists have visited this area in late autumn, so that it is almost virgin ground. On the maps copied here I have added our records as blue dots. Our records extend the known ranges of *C. hadriaticus* and *C. boryi* by about 70 km, of *C. laevigatus* by about 140 km (although this record needs verifying), and of *C. robertianus* by about 50 km. Only the *C. speciosus* locality was previously recorded.

References:

Phitos, D., Constantinidis, T. & Kamari, G. 2009. *The Red Data Book of Rare and Threatened Plants in Greece*. Vol. 1. Hellenic Botanic Society, Patra.

Ruksans, J. 2013. Seven new crocuses described. *The Alpine Gardener*: 81: 188-193.

Tan, K., Iatrou, G. 2001. *Endemic Plants of Greece: the Peloponnisos*. Gads Forlag, Copenhagen.

CROCUS COLLECTABILIA: CERAMICS

John Grimshaw

In the parallel world of snowdrops there are some notable collections of artefacts featuring snowdrops in their design. These range from hideously tacky to rather lovely, though I suppose beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Not wishing to compete, and being a croconut before a galanthophile I keep my eye open for decorative objects featuring crocuses. They do not seem to be so popular as *Galanthus*, but do occur from time-to-time.



Octagonal plate in 'Crocus' by Clarice Cliff (21.5 cm across).

Probably the most famous are the Art Deco ceramics in the 'Crocus' series by Clarice Cliff. A young designer for the firm of Wilkinsons at the Newport Pottery in Burslem, Staffordshire, in 1927 she started painting ceramic items in bold patterns that proved very popular and were marketed as 'Bizarre by Clarice Cliff.' In 1928 she introduced her pattern 'Crocus', featuring (as it were) clumps of recognisable crocuses sprouting from a rim of green above a brown base. It became her signature design, and was enduringly popular, being produced from 1928 to 1963. What is remarkable is that each item was hand-painted: in the earliest days the dedicated painter of 'Crocus' was Ethel Barrow, who then trained a team of 'girls' in the factory to produce the pattern. At first the pottery used the general 'Bizarre' backstamp to identify the source, with the word CROCUS being hand-painted on, but later the word was incorporated into the printed logo, giving a rough guide to the age of a piece.

The ceramic 'shapes' to which 'Crocus' was applied vary from simple classic plates and bowls to very striking Art Deco designs. These are rare and sought-after, but beware of much later 'reprints' that use a printed version of the pattern on similar shapes.



The backstamp of an early bowl in Clarice Cliff's 'Crocus' pattern, showing the hand-painted word CROCUS – probably done in 1928 or 1929 by Ethel Barrow.



In this backstamp from a later side plate CROCUS is printed, but the decorator has 'signed' the plate with a little green squiggle.

The classic 'Crocus' pattern is shown above – it is sometimes called 'Autumn Crocus' because a later version with more pastel shades was called 'Spring Crocus'. 'Summer Crocus' appears on a green background, while 'Gloria Crocus' is an underglazed pattern in pastels. The pattern was also done in oranges and yellows as 'Sungloom Crocus' and in single colours in 'Blue Crocus' and 'Purple Crocus'. In 'Peter Pan Crocus' flowers appear with a rabbit under a tree, and in 'Awakening' individual flowers appear above wavy lines (see e.g. L. Griffin, 1998, *The Fantastic Flowers of Clarice Cliff*, Pavilion Books Ltd.). A selection of colourways and shapes is usually available on Ebay.

A Staffordshire competitor was Burgess and Leigh (still producing pottery today), with some notable Art Deco designs in the 1930s under their trademark Burleigh Ware name. Their designer was Harold Bennett, who also exhibited paintings at the Royal Academy, and was noted for his use of tree outlines in his patterns. One such features a smattering of individual crocus flowers in 'grass' below a yellow tree. It appears to be rare. (See E. Coupe, 1998, *Collecting Burleigh Ware*, Letterbox Publishing.)



A Burleigh Ware sandwich tray (28.5 cm long), featuring the 'Crocus' pattern by Harold Bennett.



Maling 'Crocus' bulb dish and fruit bowl, c. 1933

Although of similar date, but not Deco and much less refined is the 'Crocus' pattern produced by the Newcastle based company C.T. Maling Ltd., once the largest pottery in the UK. It consists of a border of multi-coloured, 5-merous (!) crocuses transferred to the rim of (in those that I've seen) rather ornately shaped pots, with a hand-applied, slightly lustrous 'fish-scale' painted lower portion. They conjure up Great-Granny's chintzy parlour filled with rather too much stuff, but there is something rather fabulous about them.

The final ceramic object to write about now is very different: it bears no representation of a *Crocus* or any other plant, but in its way has a significant connection to the genus. It's a tile made in the Maw & Co. factory at Brosely, Shropshire, sometime between the 1862-1883. Maw & Co. tapped into an enormous Victorian demand for patterned (so-called encaustic) tiles imitating those made in the Middle Ages, and its founders, the brothers George and Arthur Maw, became extremely rich. It was this fortune that enable George Maw to indulge his passion for plants and his interest in *Crocus* that resulted in the famous and ultra-rare *Monograph of the Genus Crocus* (1886). Its exquisite hand-coloured drawings (by Maw himself) remain unparalleled for their accurate representation of the botanical details of each species.



A tile stamped on the reverse Maw & Co., Brosely, Salop

SEED DISTRIBUTION

Dear fellow-Croconuts,

The time has come again to ask for your donations of Crocus-seeds and corm(let)s. The pods are forming already and they promise a good seedset, so I'm looking forward to getting a lot of seeds from many people all over the world...with your cooperation we can share those wonderful gems with each other, so a big thank you goes out to all donors in advance. Please don't hesitate to send in small amounts of seeds, even a couple of seeds can make someone else very happy! Also, seeds of more common species and cultivars are more than welcome, since they are especially good for starting croconuts and people who want to sow them directly in the garden to get a more naturalised look.

This year, as in the previous years, I will be accepting corms and cormlets in the exchange too. It has shown to be a good formula; many members only want seed, but quite a few like to get young cormlets or some bigger flower-sized corms too. So if you have any corms and/or cormlets to spare, please send them in.

Here's the rundown: like in the previous year's it's the aim of the seed exchange to get *Crocus* seed to members as close as possible to the correct time for them to be sown during the higher temperatures of late summer 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, when the ripe seed is expelled from the mature seedpod in late spring to early summer. For that reason, we normally ask members to send seed as soon as possible after they have collected it, and in any case **before the 15th of August.**

During the last weeks of August, I'll compose the list and e-mail it to members who have requested it (Donors who are members will receive the list automatically). Your **request for the seedlist** should reach me before **the 15th of August too.** See e-mail address below.

Donors will be allowed to choose from the list first and non-donors will also be able to make a choice from the list and I will take into account what they ask for as well. **Orders** should reach me by e-mail before **the 15th of September.** I will try to send all orders out before the end of September. Seeds should be sown immediately and left exposed to the weather until they germinate, after which they may be brought under cover.

Price for ordering seeds is **5 €/order** to cover costs. **To be paid with the order**, before the 15th of September.

Requests for the seedlist should be e-mailed (before the 15th of August) to: seedexcrocusgroup@gmail.com

Donations of seed and corm(let)s can be send to:

(For the UK): Tony Goode, 3 Woodland Road, Hellesdon, Norwich. NR6 5RA

(For the rest of the world): Wim Boens, Brugsesteenweg 17, 8750 Wingene, Belgium

With the kindest regards

Wim

Regarding the Nagoya Protocol:

The reputation of the Crocus Group is at risk if we offer seed that has been collected illegally, or that does not have permission for distribution. This could do harm to future attempts to people who want to collect legitimately. The Crocus Group is not able to check every seed submission, so please do not submit seed that would put our reputation at risk. Please also retain documentation giving any relevant permission for as long as possible!



Crocus 'Celia'

This superb apparent *C. napolitanus* × *C. tommasinianus* was grown for decades by the late Revd. Richard Blakeway-Phillips as 'Margot', an old cultivar praised by E.A. Bowles. Unfortunately after the RHS Crocus Trial it was decreed that it couldn't be proven that there was an indubitable link to the old 'Margot' so the new name 'Celia', commemorating one of the B-P clan, was chosen. It is easily grown and corms are slowly circulating.