

## ***Crocus Group Bulletin No. 52 : Spring/Autumn 2020***

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Welcome to the late, Winter/Summer edition of the Crocus Group newsletter. My apologies for the lateness of this edition. It has been a Summer of great extremes in many parts of Australia. In this area alone we have had fires, heatwaves, drought and now floods, which has kept me busy dealing with the effects. It certainly has not been a boring Summer. I will be interested to see what Crocus made it through. I hope all of them!!

Dr John Grimshaw has retired from his duties as the Northern Hemisphere editor. Thanks, so much for your contributions John. I will continue with the editing. Anyone who feels inclined to contribute to this newsletter is very welcome!! Even a picture with a few words would be great!!

In this edition there are contributions from 3 people, Tony Willis writes about his recent trip to North Macedonia and the very interesting Crocus they found in various localities through this region.

Tomas Huber writes about his experience growing Crocus in Germany. I have divided his fascinating article into 2 sections. Part 2 will be in the next edition. Wim Boens writes about 3 crocus he has grown, and the results from the last seed distribution.

## **SNOW-MELT CROCUSES IN NORTH MACEDONIA 2019**

**(Tony Willis)** At the end of May four of us visited the mountains on the North Macedonian borders with Albania and Greece. We had all been there before, but a little later, in early June. Our 'target' mountains were Pelister, Magara, Jablanika, Korab and Sar (Scardus). On previous occasions we had started in the north and then gone southwards, but one of our 'targets' was *Crocus pelistericus* on Pelister and in 2017 guides at the hotel had told us that they were to be found just after the snow melted on the south side of the mountain, so we decided to start in the south and work our way north. Pelister. We hired a 4x4 with driver hoping to be driven to the lakes on the south side of the mountain, as the guides at the hotel had told us to be off the top by about midday to avoid heavy thunderstorms and at a guess it is about a seven hour round trip. In the event he could only get us as far as the refuge after which most of the track was under snow. After walking for two hours we were still some distance short of the lakes, and we turned back. So we failed to find *C. pelistericus*, and could see nowhere on the north slope that looked remotely like suitable habitat. There is a stream that runs just below the refuge but the herbage was far too rank, and we looked with binoculars on the edge of the snow further up the valley, but there was no sign and it just didn't look right. However, there were a lot of *C. veluchensis* from around the refuge right up and over the top of the ridge and the population proved quite interesting. Just over the top we found an unusual one with both stamens and stigma being white, and somehow were remiss enough to fail to photograph it. Equally unusual, quite a lot of the flowers had either yellow, or yellow suffused with brown tubes which looked like *C. sieberi* ssp *sublimis* (see photo) They were growing in small groups among normal *C. veluchensis*. Previously we have found quite a lot of crocuses growing in the pine forest much lower down and these also appeared to be *C. sieberi* ssp *sublimis*, but they were a considerable distance from the ridge above the refuge. The two could be the same or the ones we saw

on the ridge could be hybrids. Magara. The path was blocked with snow just above the tree line, so we confined our searches to the area just below, where there were quite a few of the pale form of *C.vijicii*. these were growing close to the snow and varied in colour from a good primrose yellow to cream. Jablanica. We walked for about two hours and just above the tree line found a big population of *C.jablanicensis* growing in grass on conglomerate. Further up we found a large population of *C.pelistericus* growing close to a stream and in an area of bog. I have seen the *C.pelistericus* on Kajmakcalan in Greece where the flowers are a fairly uniform colour except for the odd white form, but on Jablanica there was a lot of variation - see photos. These included several pure white forms and also others with purple from the base to half way up the petals and then white. In some places *C.jablanicensis* were growing within a foot or two of *C.pelistericus* on drier, up hill parts of the site and in one place there were some *C.jablanicensis* with purple bases to their tubes, not unlike *C.novicii*. The immediate reaction was that they were all hybrids between *C.pelistericus* and *C.jablanicensis*, the problem is that I understand that genetically they are quite far apart, so hybridisation is fairly unlikely. It seems more likely they are natural variations within a population, as happens not infrequently in the wild. Korab. We climbed quite high on Korab looking for either or both *C.pelistericus* and *C.scardicus*, to see if the two species overlapped at all, but in vain. All we found was quite normal *C.veluchensis*. Sar (Scardus). Our timing was just right. There were acres of *C.scardicus* on the north facing slopes and large populations of *C.veluchensis* as well. Of particular note was a *C.scardicus* which looked just like *C. x gotoburgensis* (see photo ). We only saw the one despite searching diligently for others, but to no avail. It was growing in a mixed population of *C.scardicus* and *C.veluchensis* among sparse low *Vaccinium* type shrub. The nearest population of *C.pelistericus* that I know of is about forty miles away, so it is unlikely to have been *C.xgotoburgensis*. *C.scardicus* and *C.veluchensis* are genetically quite far apart I understand,so it is unlikely to have been a cross between those two. It is possible that it is just an unusual colour break of *C.scardicus*. I suppose that there is also the possibility that some joker dropped some seed of *C.x gotoburgensis* or even a corm there, and that was the result. Though that is rather far fetched I think! Another interesting site we found for *C.scardicus* was up a valley just below our hotel. This had a conifer wood on the south side, and what was notable was that *C.scardicus* was almost entirely confined to the north facing slope under the wood and was even growing in the wood in quite deep shade. This was a very successful trip in that we were lucky and got the timing just about right, but it ended up posing a lot more questions than it answered.



*Figure 1 Mount Pelister*





Figure 2 *Crocus cvijicii* pale form





*Figure 3* *Crocus cvijicii*





Figure 4 *Crocus veluchensis*





*Figure 5* *Crocus veluchensis* Dark Form





Figure 6 *Crocus scardicus*





Figure 7 *Crocus jablancensis*





Figure 8 *Crocus jablancensis* & *Crocus pelisteriscus*



# An easy crocus garden (Tomas Huber)

From my beginning as a botanical analphabetic to a specialised crocus grower and back to a lazy gardener

By Thomas Huber



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## Foreword

In autumn 2014 I have been asked by a friend if I would like to contribute some of my own experiences about growing Crocus in his new book. ‘What could I contribute, after I have killed so



many wonderful and rare crocus in the last 15 years' was my first thought. But then I realized that my own experiences – good or bad ones – can help other Croconuts to avoid such mistakes and grow their plants without or at least with fewer losses.

The original use was cancelled, and the article slept on my computer for 5 years now, until Mat Murray asked me, if I would like to write an article for the Crocus-Group bulletin. My sight on the genus starting from a total beginner will hopefully be a good help for other beginners – and furthermore old hand gardeners might get a smile on their face if they remember back to their own beginning with similar experiences.

I garden in the middle of Germany on 230 meters above sea level in a sandy-loamy soil. My garden is protected from strong and cold winds by Acer trees and Thuja hedges and has many places with a special micro-climate, like housewalls for additional warmth and under trees/shrubs for rain protection.

### **The Beginning**

My own crocus 'career' started in 1999, when I bought some yellow Crocus from the garden-centre and planted them in my lawn. Until then I never cared about my garden, it was just a spontaneous act. At this time I didn't know that the Crocus leaves don't have to be cut before they become yellow at the end of May, otherwise the corms can't produce enough power for next years flowering. Only by coincidence I read this in the following winter and I wasn't happy with the thought not to mow my lawn until early summer – what should the neighbours think, who all start their mower in late March or April....but it was too late, the corms were already planted.

Spring 2000 came and the yellow spots on the lawn fascinated me in such a wonderful way, that all my doubts disappeared – no matter what the neighbours and – more important - my wife might think. In future I wanted to grow more crocuses in my lawn to banish winters grey and the resulting depressions with these colourful stars. The lawn wasn't a problem, I always had a thin grass, not growing very well, so mowing in May was makeable with the mower. In gardens with a thick layer of grass one might need the help of a scythe.

In autumn 2000 I visited many garden-centres and found a good selection of white, blue, yellow and striped crocus – I didn't distinguish between large and small, early and late. They were planted in small groups all over the lawn (next photo: Spring 2001). In December 2000 a friend who worked at a garden-centre told me, that the garden-centres throw away the unsold corms in early winter – and soon I made a deal with them. For really less money I got hundreds of packages. Of course the selection wasn't as good as in August, but I didn't care about that because I only wanted to have a gigantic display of hundreds of crocus flowers. Unfortunately these late plants didn't flower well in the first year, because they didn't have enough time for growing, but they all survived and in the second year they flowered like nothing has happened.





The resulting colour dots in my lawn boosted my interest in crocus and I started informing about these plants via internet. There were some websites about the Crocus cultivars, private ones, some from garden-centers and online-shops where I found more plants that I wanted to grow.

Then I found Tony Goode's 'Crocus pages'

(<http://www.thealpinehouse.fsnet.co.uk/crocus%20pages/>) – but Tony listed not a single one of the wonderful garden-centre-crocus that I already knew, only names that I have never heard of. 'What a strange website', I thought.... The plants on Tony's website are the true species, growing in the wild from Portugal to Western China and from Poland to the Atlas Mountains. At this time I didn't realize, that all the crocus in trade have been collected in the wild generations ago and are the result of many years of breeding and selecting - I have been just like a little child, thinking that meat and vegetables 'grow' in the supermarket, but my interest in the wild species has been awakened.

From the garden-plants I knew that named plants all look the same – and soon I had to learn, that the wild plants show much more variation within the species. It made click in my brain, when I visited Southern France where I found thousands of *Crocus versicolor* (next photo) flowering in the mountains – not one flower looked like the other. There were pure white ones, dark blue ones, flowers with stripes and feathering in all variations, dark spots, yellow or white throat..... I spent hours exploring and photographing these wonderful natural variation - shown on the next photos while I felt like a little kid in the chocolate shop.





I also spotted, that the genus crocus has not only spring flowering plants – there are autumn flowering plants, too. I was sure that I saw such plants on the meadows around my hometown in September, but of course these were *Colchicum*, not *Crocus*. At the first sight they look similar, but if you look more carefully you can see that crocus have 3 anthers while *Colchicum* have 6 (next photo). Also the leaves are very different: *Crocus* leaves are thin like grass with a white median stripe and *Colchicum* leaves are much longer and broader. The whole *Colchicum* plant is highly toxic while *Crocus* corms are sold as food in some countries. Besides the style of *Crocus sativus* is collected and sold as saffron – one of the most expensive spices in the world – so many interesting things to learn from this wonderful genus; as always one will never finish learning.



Even today I often experience assumed ‘experts’ – working in a garden-centre or visitors in my garden - who tell me with a pitiful smile on their face, that I’m wrong and these are Colchicum – Crocuses do only flower in spring.



To be continued in the next edition .....

## Seed-exchange Crocus Group 2019 closed (Wim Boens)

Some numbers regarding our latest seedex.

We made about nine hundred small packets of seed from 142 different species/cultivars/forms of Crocus which were sent in by 31 donors and sent out to 52 members.

Here below the top 10 of the “most wanted” species, but almost all seeds were asked in high quantity. As always, I could not give everyone everything they asked for, but I did my best.

No.	Name	Packets asked
9	baytopiorum	26
8	banaticus ex 'Snowdrift'	25
135	wattiorum	24
14	cambessedesii (cornlets)	20
83	nudiflorus ex 'Orla'	20
116	taseliensis	20
30	cvijicii	19
53	ibrahimii	19
65	lycicus	18
1	abantensis	17
18	cartwrightianus (Wild Collected -Oros Merenta, Greece)	17
31	cvijicii ex Vermion (Greece)	17
127	vallicola	17



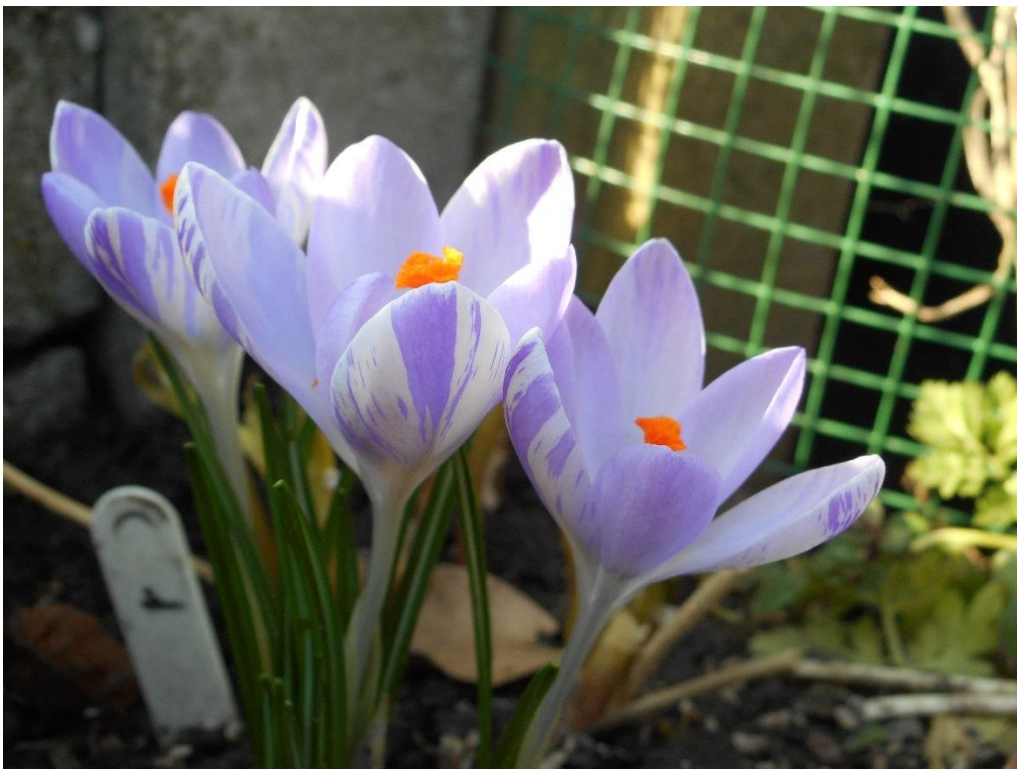
Total price for sending to a member (package and postage) was up to 5.38 € p.p. this year.  
I would like to thank the donors for taking the time to collect and send the seeds and the members who asked for seeds.  
Looking forward to a year with a good seed set and a wonderful seed-exchange next year.  
Happy sowing/growing,  
Wim Boens  
Seed-exchange manager.

## Crocus in the Spotlight (Wim Boens)

### Cultivar in the spotlight: Crocus ‘Wandering Minstrel’

Named by John Grimshaw, the name comes from a song in “The Mikado” by Gilbert and Sullivan (“...a wandering minstrel I, a thing of shreds and patches...”) He selected it from a mixed population of *C. tommasinianus*/*C. vernus* in a cemetery in Oxford in 1989. This hybrid always stirs up some controversy. Either people like it, or they think it is virused. Just to make sure, I had one of mine checked for viruses in a laboratory and the results came back as virus-free. So that means it is a stable genetic mutation, to be more correct: the splashes on the outer tepals are transposable genetic elements like in many 'splashy' flowers.

The inner tepals of this beautiful cultivar have a nice, even lilac colour and the outers have a lighter lilac base-colour splattered with darker patches. It's a strong but slow-to-increase cultivar which does well in the open garden over here, same as most *tommasinianus* and *vernus* forms. It's an exquisite form for someone who wants to grow something different in their collection.





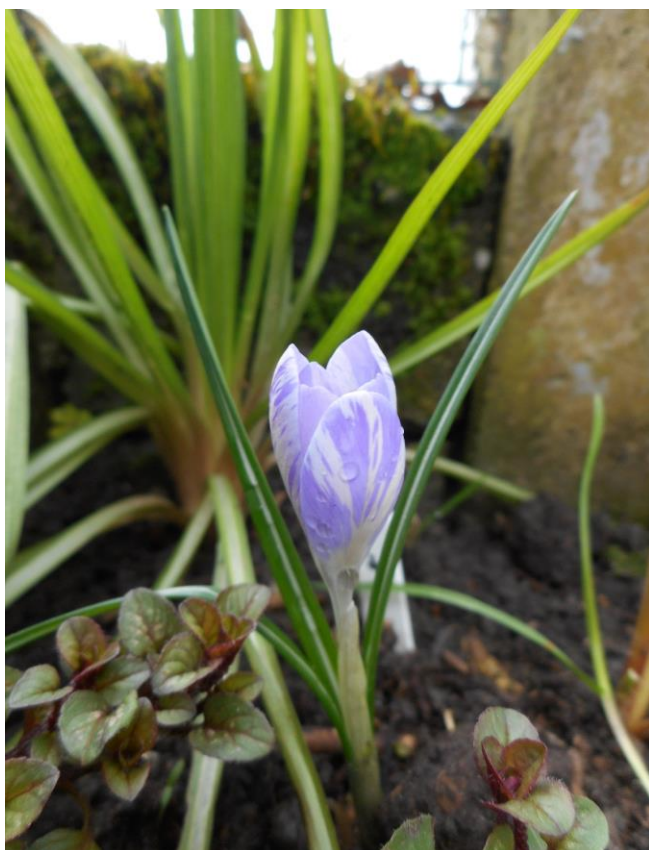


Figure 9 *Crocus "Wandering Minstrel"*

## Cultivar in the spotlight: *Crocus* ‘Wendy Marr’

Another *Crocus* hybrid between *C. vernus* and *C. tommasinianus*. This form was named by Allan Robinson in honour of the wife of Dr. John Marr. In 2017 it was presented by Allan to John for his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In bud, it looks like a very pale purple/almost white flower, but when it opens, the magic happens. The inner tepals are feathered in violet both on the outside and the inside and the inside of the outers is lightly feathered in the same colour. Another great form, which increases well in the garden/



Figure 11 *Crocus "Wendy Marr"*





Figure 12 *Crocus "Wendy Marr"* In closed bud

## Species in the spotlight: *Crocus hatayensis*.

In 2018 Jānis Rukšāns published a new *Crocus* species from the series *kotschyani* which he named as *Crocus hatayensis*. I had been growing this species under the name of *Crocus* aff. *kotschyanus* sp. nov. for a couple of years before that. When I received the first corm, I just planted it out in the garden, since *C. kotschyanus* does well over here without any protection. The same goes for this species, it's a hassle-free, quick to increase species.

*Crocus hatayensis*, which originates from Hatay province in Turkey differs from *C. kotschyanus*, which hails from the Cilician Taurus mountains by having its leaves out already during anthesis. Also, the stigma is more hidden among the anthers and is less branched than in *C. kotschyanus*. Personally, I find the tepals to be smaller and differently coloured also, they are not as wide and less overlapping, and their striped pattern is more clearly visible. Also, they start flowering about a month after *C. kotschyanus* flowers and they keep on going until December, by which time *C. kotschyanus* has stopped flowering already.

In my garden in Belgium, it grows very well without any protection. I've got it growing under some trees, where it does get watered in summer, but the excess water is quickly sucked up by the trees of course. The ones I keep dry and cool in a pot in summer do just as well, so it seems this species is very tolerant of different growing regimes and different temperatures (winters down to -10°C and summers up to 35 - 40°C). It does seem to like (as do most Crocuses) to be fed during its growing period with a fertilizer high in potassium. The group in the garden gets a layer of leafmould every autumn too and it seems to appreciate that.



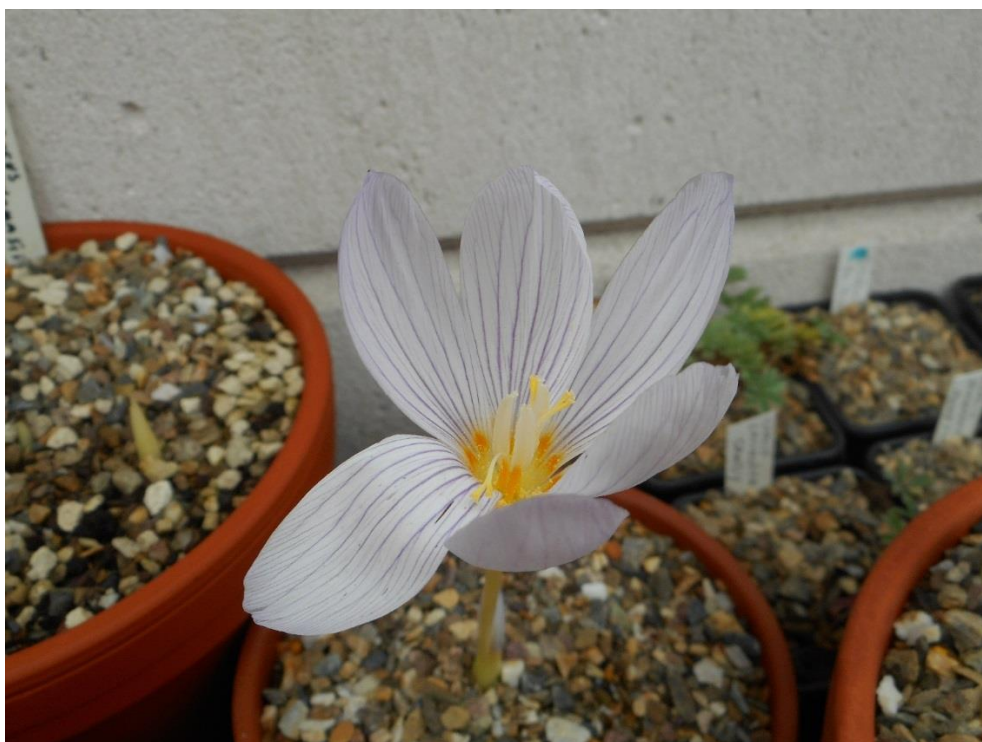


Figure 13 *Crocus hatayensis*



Figure 14 *Crocus hatayensis* in the garden