



BULB LOG 45.....7th November 2012



To cut back or leave the retreating remains of herbaceous perennials is a common dilemma for gardeners and like most questions there is no simple answer. I enjoy the seasonal changes and prefer to leave most of the decaying



foliage until later in the winter before I tidy it away. As I mentioned last week, it helps provide the birds with a food source and it also serves to help prevent light frosts penetrating too deep into the ground. I usually start to clear it away in January, replacing it with the contents of the compost heaps as a mulch before the early bulbs start pushing through. Leaves are another story – the lovely red carpet of leaves covering the path and gravel area looks good for a short while but needs tidying away before it becomes

too slimy. Different rules apply to the alpines beds and evergreen plants such as the Cyclamen.



It is important to prevent evergreen plants being covered in a layer of fallen decaying leaves.



Bulb House

Our autumn flowering bulbs are running around three weeks later than recent years – you will notice I resist the temptation to say ‘later than normal’ as is commonly said because I do not know what a normal season is. The trouble is that we use a fixed calendar to mark out our seasons while the plants rely on variable parameters such as temperature, light and moisture to trigger growth.



Muscari leaves

Many bulbs such as the Muscari, above and Narcissus, below, are well developed now, reminding me of the need to ensure that they do not dry out completely. Judging when to water is by experience of your own conditions. Compost mix, clay or plastic pots, depth of plunge, temperatures, light levels, air humidity are all critical so it has to be your own experience that tells you when to water. Try and choose a bright day so excess water will evaporate

away quickly and do avoid watering when frosty conditions are forecast.



Narcissus bulbs are especially prone to breaking down into many small bulbs if they get dry when the leaves are growing - so it is especially important to ensure that they get sufficient water to support this active leaf growth phase - as seen on the left



Crocus banaticus

Crocus banaticus is the most distinct of all Crocus being the only one where the inner three floral segments are significantly shorter than the outer three giving it an almost iris-like appearance. No surprise then to know that one of the names it previously went under was Crocus iridiflora. It grows very well for us both under glass and in the open garden where we have a number of colour forms but strangely I have never had any success keeping the beautiful white form that others seem to grow so well.



Pollinating

I had to shut the glasshouse doors to get the temperature high enough to open the flowers and even then they only opened briefly when the sun which now sits very low in the sky, shone. As there are no insects about I have to do the pollinating if I am to stand any chance of getting any seed. To encourage the pollen to stick to the brush I moisten the tip by licking the back of my hand then running the brush lightly over the licked area. You do not want it too wet and I find this method works perfectly, applying a tiny amount of water to the tips of the bristles



Once you have picked up some pollen on the brush you need to apply it gently to the stigmatic surfaces on the tips of the filaments which in this species are much branched. Due to the later flowering and hence the lower temperatures and light levels I am not too hopeful of the pollen growing down to fertilise the seed.



Crocus in bulb house



***Crocus kotschyanus* ex CMW2685**



A seed raised plant ex Turkey which I think is another variation of *Crocus kotschyanus* – I welcome comments or confirmation of this identification.



Crocus mathewii HKEP 9291

I have a few more pots of *Crocus mathewii* in flower now and this picture highlights a common problem we face when photographing white flowers with auto-focus cameras.

Notice the flowers are not in sharp focus because the autofocus system looks for sharp edges of contrast on which to focus. The label and the far edge of the pot is where the camera sharpened the focus despite the centre of the frame being filled with the predominantly white flowers.

To see more wonderful crocus visit the [crocus](#) [pages on the forum](#)



Crocus mathewii HKEP 9291



***Crocus mathewii* 'Dream Dancer'**

A number of variations in the colouring of *Crocus mathewii* are being recognised including this form which has darker petals but retains the deep coloured throat and tube. The separation between this species and the closely related *Crocus asumaniae* seems to be almost totally reliant on the dark coloured throat and tube and could be described as a tenuous boundary, especially as a number of plants are being raised from seed with virtually no dark colouring at all. It would be a great shame to see this beautiful plant that celebrates one of my greatest plant heroes being sunk back into *Crocus asumaniae*. I am confident that whatever the taxonomists decide the Mathewii name will continue to be associated with this beautiful plant in cultivation.





Crocus ligusticus

Most of us know this plant as *Crocus medius*, a name that research has shown to be invalid. If you want to read why this is, let me recommend again Janis Ruksans' Complete Guide to the Genus *Crocus* which is essential reading for anyone interested in *Crocus*: [check out my review](#).

There are issues as the majority of this species in cultivation which is infected with a virus. At best this causes dark streaks in the flowers and at worst

mutation and failure of the flowers to open.



Crocus ligusticus

I am trying to achieve a clean stock and I am cautiously hopeful that I now have two pots of virus free plants.



Crocus ligusticus



Sternbergia sicula

Two pots of *Sternbergia sicula* allow me to continue my observations of this genus – notice on the right how the stem bends over as the flower matures.



Sternbergia lutea

A fine form of *Sternbergia lutea*, originating from Crete, is in flower.

In my experience to date their stems stay upright as the flower matures holding the seed capsule upright unlike the sicula forms, and *S. greuteriana*, where the stem pulls the seed capsule down towards the ground.

Enjoy more *Sternbergia* on these [forum pages](#)



Finally today two more pictures showing the chaos that autumn brings to our garden with leaves scattered everywhere helped by the blackbirds that forage among them in search of food. The same birds are also responsible for the moss scattered on the paving slabs which they rip off the stones in our dyke. I appeal to you not to be too quick to tidy away the autumn – enjoy the colours of the fallen leaves and dying back growth for a wee while longer allowing the birds to forage.....

