

CROCUS GROUP BULLETIN NO. 14

Hon Secretary's Notes

After the magnificent response of those who bought crocuses at last Spring's Crocus Auction our funds are larger than ever before but please do not let that deter you all from supporting the next Auction, on 17th March 1987. In the meantime we are investigating the possibility of using a portion of the funds to print colour pictures of crocuses not illustrated in The Crocus which could then be bought by members.

Elizabeth Parker Jervis tells me that her father, the well known horticulturalist R.D.Trotter, always said Crocus gargaricus flowered best when confined in a 'concentration camp', meaning a sink or a large pot, thus preventing the corms from spreading out by means of their stolons. He got the Award of Merit for it in about 1958 so he ought to know. She has also found the same thing with the other common stoloniferous crocus, C. nudiflorus. I, on the other hand, growing crocuses in the open in a garden, find I get far more flowers after I have lifted and divided a clump, putting the corms back into rich compost with the usual top dressing of large quantities of Shetland Pony manure. I have always understood that the reason behind the frequent statement by gardening correspondents that such and such a bulb 'flowers better when starved', meaning in a pot, is that the nitrogen potassium balance becomes such that flowering is encouraged rather than further growth. Why does this not happen out of doors? Comments welcomed for the next bulletin.

In view of the atrocious weather which we have had recently in both Spring and Autumn I do suggest anyone intending to visit any of the gardens in the following program telephones the owners a few days before to ask them whether there are any crocuses to see. not to mention the depth of snow cover on the approach road to his house. It is extremely helpful for the host or hostess to know whether anyone is intending to arrive - if no one they can hibernate in peace - so please do notify them of your intention to turn up.

Program 1986/87

Sunday 12th October 1986

Mr Roger Poulett of Nurses Cottage, North Mundham, Chichester, Sussex PO20 6JY Tel: Chichester 785496 invites us to come at 11 a.m. to see his crocuses and other interesting plants. He says it will take nearly 2 hours to see everything.

Mr & Mrs P Maynard, well known in the Iris world, will then lead us to their house, 43 Sea Lane, Goring-by-Sea, W.Sussex BN12 4QD where we can eat the sandwiches we have brought and afterwards

look round their garden. Their telephone no: is Worthing 41993. (Highdown is not open at weekends in October, in case anyone thought of trying to visit it on that day.)

Sunday 1st March 1987.

You are welcome to come and see my crocuses, two and a half miles west of Oxford. All grow outside, no hope of a nice warm greenhouse but there are also willows and snowdrops. Come at 11 a.m. - I will provide coffee. Anyone who survives a muddy walk-gumboots essential - can at least eat their packed lunch under cover. Telephone Oxford 247883. Address : South Hayes, Yarnells Hill, Oxford OX2 9BG. Map-readers look for Botley/North Hinksey.

Sunday 8th March 1987

Mr R. Cobb, who has the N.C.C.P.G. National collection of crocuses, invites us to see them. (He is willing to show them by arrangement on other occasions.) If sent a stamped addressed envelope, he will provide a map showing the route from M1. Come at 11 a.m. to Aurelia, 188, Bramcote Lane, Wollaton, Nottingham NG8 2QN. Telephone Nottingham 281525. Mr & Mrs Cobb have kindly offered to produce us coffee on arrival. Part of the collection is in frames and greenhouses so there should be something to see no matter what the weather produces.

Tuesday 17th March 1987

Crocus lecture by Brian Mathew at 5.30 p.m. in R.H.S. New Hall, followed by an auction of crocus corms in aid of Crocus Group funds. Please support the auction by bringing and buying crocuses.

If you have any interesting crocuses in flower at the time of any of these meetings, please bring one, if you can to show to the rest of us. If you have any to spare, Crocus Group funds would gladly accept the proceeds if you would hold a small car-boot sale and thus spread round interesting species or varieties.

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South Hayes
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OXFORD OX2 9BG

Telephone Oxford : 247883.

ITALIAN SPRING CROCUSES

To predict when autumn-flowering crocuses will be at their best in the wild is comparatively easy. Spring crocuses are much more chancy. This spring we were lucky. Arriving in Naples on 22nd March we found that Crocus imperati subsp. imperati, though largely

over at lower levels on the Sorrento peninsula, was still in full glory above 1000 metres. And travelling North, with the spring, for the following three weeks we saw five more crocuses in bloom, ending with sheets of Crocus vernus subsp. albiflorus, in many colours, on Monte Grappa in the Veneto.

The two subspecies of Crocus imperati differ not only in anatomical details and geographical distribution (subspecies imperati in Campania, subspecies suaveolens in Lazio) but also in ecological requirements. Subspecies imperati was always in the open, among rocky outcrops between the stands of oak and chestnut on the steep hills behind Amalfi and Castellamare. Subspecies suaveolens, on the pass north of Itri, was in woodland or at least on wood-borders, accompanied with an almost white form of Crocus biflorus subspecies biflorus. Incidentally the garden form of C.imperati known as Jager's variety is certainly subspecies suaveolens

Crocus etruscus in southern Tuscany, is also a woodland species. We failed to find it in the classic locality close to Massa Maritima- or think we failed: a large colony, long past flowering, on which we pounced, was eventually declared to be C.vernus subsp. vernus but may, when a few corms that we brought home flower next spring, turn out to be C.etruscus after all. The true species was frequent and flowering in quite deep shade under oak and juniper beside the road north towards Monterotondo, while Crocus vernus subsp. vernus was widespread in the Appenines between Arezzo and Florence, around Lucca and, superbly, by the exit from the Florence-Bologna autostrada at Roncobilaggio.

DICK DAVID.

CROCUSES FROM SEED.

Raising crocuses from seed is an interesting pursuit and indeed is almost an obligation for those species which do not readily propagate themselves vegetatively. In this garden, crocuses have been grown for over twenty years and spontaneous seedlings appear fairly frequently. In addition. I have raised seedlings of certain crocuses deliberately to satisfy my curiosity about the likely nature of the progeny.

Crocus speciosus and C. pulchellus seem to have crossed to produce a range of plants with intermediate characteristics. Some of these have the netted veining of the segments typical of speciosus but with the yellowish throat and white anthers of pulchellus. Others seem to lean towards either parent and their hybrid origin can only be suspected. Crocus ochroleucus has given rise to a seedling which lacks the golden throat and hence is completely white. Crocus kotschyanus ssp. kotschyanus grows abundantly with a good deal of variation of size and colouration but it is impossible to be sure which, if any, are local seedlings.

Crocus sieberi ssp. *atticus* f. *tricolor* grows and self-sows in a bulb frame. A few years ago it crossed with *Crocus sieberi* ssp. *sieberi* growing nearby and the seeds must have been widely distributed by ants. The resulting seedlings pop up everywhere and have been most interesting. They are broadly intermediate in colouring between the parents, some tending towards *tricolor* and some approximating to the Cretan plants. Self-sown seedlings are a menace in what is supposed to be a well organised crocus collection but some of the *sieberi* crosses are very attractive and probably worth cloning for commercial distribution. Also in the bulb frame dozens of seedlings of *Crocus pestalozzae* have appeared. They vary in colour from deep to pale mauve but so far no white seedlings has resulted.

Seedlings from hand pollination

My activities with the camel-hair brush are limited only by the availability of time. As far as possible every pot-grown crocus is hand pollinated though not all respond with seed capsules. Normally the purpose is simply to perpetuate a species in order to maintain it in the collection. For some reason certain species seem to do well in cultivation soon after their introduction from the wild but then lose their vigour over the next few years. I have found this to be the case with *Crocus michelsonii*, *leichtlinii* and several subspecies of *Crocus biflorus*. It is hoped that a population of locally-raised seedlings might prove more vigorous and perhaps embody some of the variation which occurs in the wild.

The progeny of many such pollinations has been unremarkable especially the yellow (*C. flavus*, *olivieri* and *chrysanthus*.) *Crocus vallicola* has just given look-alikes though I hope one day to be able to cross it with *C. scharojanii* since the hybrid is known to occur where the two grow together in northern Turkey. *Crocus pulchellus* 'Zephyr' gave seedlings which included a high proportion of pure whites as well as some resembling 'Zephyr' itself. Some of the whites have proved to be very attractive and amenable garden plants. Very few mauve seedlings came from this batch. These seem to be pale forms of *Crocus pulchellus* and there has been nothing to suggest that *speciosus* is involved in the parentage of 'Zephyr'.

Crocus corsicus albus, one of the most beautiful of all crocuses, on self pollination gave some seedlings resembling the parent, the flowers being white with creamy exteriors to the outer segments. Others were completely white and no mauves occurred though not many seedlings survived to flowering size.

Crocus banaticus albus, in the glorious form introduced by Dr. John Marr, gave only mauve seedlings, not a single white. I would be most interested to hear of the experiences of other members of the group in raising crocuses from seed, either through this Bulletin or by correspondence. Even a simple list of successes would be informative.

RAY COBB.

Crocus Personalities of the Past

In view of our great debt to gardens and botanists of the past who studied, collected, cultivated and wrote about Crocuses I think it would be fitting to run a series of biographical notes about them and their work. 1986 marks the centenary of the publication of Maw's Monograph of The Genus Crocus so it is right and proper that our notes should begin with the remarkable George Maw, Victorian scholar and businessman.

He was born in London in 1832 and studied at Cirencester Agricultural College, taking a special interest in Geology, Archeology and Botany, three subjects which undoubtedly provided him with the skills which he later utilised to the full, both in his profession and in his remarkably successful life as an amateur botanist. My use of the term amateur is not in any way intended to be derogatory but purely to distinguish this part of his life from his career. He was indeed very much the professional when it came to the study of plants and clearly he moved in illustrious botanical circles, on one occasion accompanying his friends Joseph Dalton Hooker and John Ball on an expedition to the High Atlas in Morocco. Obviously, as plant enthusiasts we know him best for his botanical work but probably his greatest claim to fame through the company of Maw & Co. which he and his brother founded to manufacture decorative clay tiles. This began in Worcester in 1850 but was transferred shortly after to Benthall in the Ironbridge Gorge, Shropshire in 1852, an area with which Maw remained associated for much of his active life. So successful was this business that the Benthall Works was moved to a larger site at Jackfield in 1883 where it expanded to become the largest decorative tile factory in the world. International awards for design were received from exhibitions in London (1862), Paris (1867), Philadelphia (1876) and Adelaide (1887) and the tiles were widely used in houses for floors, fireplaces, porches and walls, and in shops, public houses, churches, railway stations and town halls throughout Britain and the British Empire.

For 33 years Maw lived at Benthall Hall, a fine 16th century country house which is now a National Trust property with Sir Paul and Lady Benthall in residence. Here, he began a garden in which, assisted by seven gardeners, he grew many plants including most of the known Crocus species, which were at least partly housed in an enormous frame covered by glass lights. Labelling was, as might be expected of the man, methodical with a colour-code system used to denote whether herbarium specimens were required, seeds to be collected or cuttings to be taken. For name tags, flat clay 'labels' were made, written in black ink and fired in the kiln so that they were permanent; Sir Paul Benthall still finds legible portions of these labels in the garden.

During his later years at Benthall he undoubtedly devoted much of his time to the study of the genus Crocus and preparing his meticulous illustrations must have occupied a great deal of this. These were reproduced in the monograph of 1886 and show a wealth

of detail which can rarely, if ever, have been equalled.

Maw's classification of *Crocus* based on the absence or presence of a "basal spathe", (prophyll) and on corm tunic was not new, for it was the system used by J. Sabine (more of him later on in the series) in 1829 and W Herbert (also to be written up) in 1847. Maw expected on these systems to incorporate new finds and it is fairly clear that this approach is the most satisfactory. Certainly the classification of J.G.Baker (1873), based on degree of division of the style does not work very satisfactorily, although this is an additional helpful character in identifying species and groups.

It is a pity there isn't a *Crocus mawii*. His name lives on in a *Chrysanthemum*, a *Saxifraga* and a *Draba*, and of course in his beautiful monograph.

BRIAN MATHEW.