CROCUS GROUP BULLETIN No 23

Hon Secretary's Notes

Presumably crocuses resting undisturbed underground were unaffected by the severe drought. One wonders whether they will be later flowering than usual because of the need to wait until the ground is soft enough for rooting. Colchicums flower when the weather becomes colder in dry seasons before they have grown any roots. Are crocuses the same? If not, what triggers their growth?

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South Hayes
Yarnells Hill
Oxford OX2 9BG
Tel: 01865 247883

Saturday, 7 October 1995

In Wales there lives a mysterious lady who grows so many Saffron crocuses (C. sativus) that she supplies Harrods with Saffron. One can never guarantee the flowering time of crocuses, but if we arrive there at 11 am on 7th October she has offered to show us round. Its a long journey but whereelse in Britain can you see Saffron grown commercially? Her name is Mrs Caroline Rider and she and her husband live at:-

CAER ESTYN FARM
RHYDDYN HILL
CAERGWRLE
CLWYD LL12 GEF

Telephone: 01978 761558 if you intend to come. There is a good bed-and-breakfast available at a nearby farm. Telephone Mrs Clark on 019787 60443. She lives at NEW FARM.

Sunday 22nd October 1995

Meet at the entrance to Wisley gardens at 11am. Jill Skilton, who looks after the Alpine houses, will be there to let us in and show us round 'behind the scenes'. There should also be crocuses in flower in the Alpine meadow.

Sunday 18th February 1996

Ray Cobb who is still the NCCPG National Crocus collection holder (until he has handed over more of his collection) has an Open Day on Sunday 18th February, 10.30am onwards. Crocus Group members welcome. It may be necessary to park near shops, 100 yards North of his house.

Mr & Mrs R COBB
"AURELIA"
188 Bramcote Lane, WOLLATON
NOTTINGHAM NG8 2QN
Tel: 0115 928 1525

Tuesday 20th February 1996

Annual Crocus Lecture and Auction of members' spare corms. Lecture will be given by David King who was prevented by urgent business at the last moment from speaking to us last year. Lecture in RHS Orchid Room will be at 5pm followed by Auction. Please bring all you can spare to swell crocus group funds and buy generously.

Title of lecture will be divulged in Spring Newsletter.

Sunday 24th February 1996

We are invited to visit the well-known garden of Mr D HAZELGROVE at PELHAM HOUSE, BRENT PELHAM, BUNTINGFORD, HERTS, SG9 0HH. Come at 11am and bring a packed lunch. Please telephone 01279 727473 if you intend to come.

The nearby nursery, Cambridge Bulbs will be open in the afternoon specially for anyone who would like to go on there after lunch.

Saturday 16th March 1996

Meet at 11am at gate into the INKPEN crocus field. It is an SSSI, owned and managed by the local Naturalist Trust, BBONT. The field is thick with Crocus vernus and it is a most astonishing sight. The flowers are of various different patterns but all are small like wild crocuses. No one seems to be certain of their origin.

I suggest that we make a small collection for the Trust amongst those who come to see the field. Crocus vernus is also naturalized near Nottingham and I thought it would be interesting to visit that site for comparison in 1997.

Inkpen is a village south west of Newbury, Berks. From Newbury take A4 and turn left just over a mile past the HALFWAY pub, signposted Inkpen and Kintbury. Take 2nd left in Kintbury village. After a mile turn right at cross-roads and continue till you reach the Recreation Ground car park. Park there, walk 200 yards down Pottery Lane, a track on right just past Recreation Ground. You should by then be at the Reserve. If I can find it myself I will try and put up signs saying something appropriate like "Here be Crocuses".

CROCUS NOVELTIES

The last few years have seen the discovery and introduction into cultivation of a remarkable number of new species and subspecies of crocus. Naturally we all want to get our hands on these goodies. Alas there are never enough to go round despite David Stephens' splendid work with the seed-exchange.Perhaps therefore, it is worth drawing attention to the many horticulturally exciting forms of common species which are in many ways even more desirable than the new species. I am not referring to the named cultivars such as C. korolkowii 'Dytiscus' and C. sieberi 'Bowles' White' but to the many clones which do not have cultivar names and which can therefore be lost sight of.

The striking form of C. minimus which Alan Edwards found on the Col de Bavella is a good example. It has a much shorter tube than the usual commercial form, very dark colouring on the outer segments and a white style. The form of C. chrysanthus with very dark, almost black, anthers exhibited by Norman Stevens of Cambridge Bulbs, a few years ago, was much admired and sought after.Even more spectacular was the black-styled form of the same species shown by Potterton and Martin in Spring 1994.

Despite the title of this article it must be acknowledged that there are many good forms of crocus which have been around for some years and not received due recognition. Examples which spring to mind are the white form of C. corsicus with buff colouring on the outer segments which ,I believe, was found at Highdown. It is far more attractive than the normal white forms of the species. Many members may also recall the fine dark-coloured Crocus banaticus which was exhibited by Dr. and Mrs. Wallis at the Horsham AGS Show.

It occurred to me that most growers will have their special forms of species in their collections. I am inviting members to write to me with details of such special forms and I will assemble a list for distribution to interested members. Such a list would be of even greater value if colour-transparencies or prints were available for loan. So please indicate whether spare photographs are available but please do not send me these at this stage. If the idea proves popular the list can eventually be published in the Newsletter.

Ray.Cobb.

A New Autumn Flowering Crocus

The New Plantsman Vol 2, part 3 (September 1995) includes an article which I submitted a short while ago describing Peter & Penny Watt's blue autumn-flowering C. biflorus, as subspecies wattiorum. I am sure that no-one will object if I repeat the salient points of the short article here, but unfortunately we do not yet run to colour photos.

Crocus biflorus Miller subsp. wattiorum
Corm tunics brown, persistent, subcoriaceous, splitting longitudinally, circumscissile at the base. Leaves 5, green, about 1mm wide and 2.5 - 3cm long (visible portion) at flowering time, minutely and very sparsely scabrid on the margins. Prophyll ('basal spathe') absent. Bract and bracteole present, subequal, rigidly erect and clearly exserted from the sheathing leaves, white, conspicuously veined green at the apex. Flower 5cm in diameter when fully open; perianth tube cylindrical, 5cm long; segments equal, lanceolate, obtuse, 30 - 32 mm long, 9 - 11mm wide, glabrous; outside of outer 3 segments cream coloured with a median purple line and 2 shorter lateral purple lines; outside of inner 3 segments pale lilac blue, stained dark purple at the base; inside of all segments lilac-blue, slightly veined and suffused purple towards the base; throat yellow, glabrous. Stamens 20 - 22mm long; filaments filiform, yellow, 8mm long; anthers blackish-maroon before dehiscence, 13mm long, sagittate with basal lobes 2mm long; pollen yellow. Style bright red, divided deeply (point of division below the base of the anthers) into 3 slender branches c. 15 - 16mm long, each branch gradually and only slightly thickened towards the apex and subdivided into 2 - 3 short lobes up to 3mm long.

Distribution: Turkey, Antalya Province, Tahtali Dag, between, and in crevices of, limestone rocks on fringes of pine woods, humus-rich soil (pH 6.5), 100 - 500m.

This was noted by Peter and Penny Watt whilst on holiday in southern Turkey in 1986, and again on a subsequent visit to the same locality in 1991. On the first occasion, since they did not recognise the plant, a few corms were collected in order to bring it into cultivation so that it could be observed as a living plant. The corms retained by them, and those passed on to me, continued to flower in autumn over a period of several years and established the fact that this is a truly autumnal crocus, not one which is flowering out of its normal period, as occasionally happens in abnormal seasons. Most of the 14 subspecies of C. biflorus recognised by me in The Crocus (1982) are distinguished on combinations of characters rather than on any unique feature, and are consequently not easy to identify. This new subspecies, however, as far as it is known at present, is readily recognisable in that it is autumn-flowering, has blackish anthers and three very long red style branches which are again divided at the apex; in fact in the character of its style it is more reminiscent of the 'Saffron group' of species. The red style branches of C. biflorus subsp. wattiorum taste of Saffron, so it could almost certainly be used as a source of that expensive spice, although the yield would not be as good as that of C. sativus because the branches are shorter and more slender.

The only other autumn-flowering member of the C. biflorus group is subsp. melantherus which has a quite different flower colouring and is endemic to southern Greece, in the Peloponnese; in this case the colour of the perianth segments is white with a yellow throat, overlaid on the exterior with variable greyish to violet speckling or suffusion. All the specimens of subsp. wattiorum seen to date have a rich lilac-blue ground colour and a cream exterior marked with one long violet median line and two shorter lateral lines.

In Surrey, subsp. wattiorum flowers between mid October and early November and appears to be easily cultivated outdoors in a raised sandy bed where it has increased vegetatively and, this year, a seed pod, but don't get too excited, there are only a few seeds in it! Others are growing it as well, I believe, so it should not take long to get around, at least in the more specialist collections of crocus enthusiasts.

Brian Mathew

THE CROCUS BIFLORUS COMPLEX IN SOUTH AND WEST TURKEY

If you draw a diagonal line on a map of Turkey, from Cannakale in the north west corner to Mersin on the south coast where it turns at a right angle southwards to become Syria, you circumscribe an area wherein grow 6 of the 14 known subspecies of Crocus biflorus. If you include the recently discovered sspp albocoronatus and wattiorum, the figure rises to 8 out of 16. Four other sspp also grow in Turkey, albeit outside the area currently under review, thus bringing the total to 12 out of 16, or 75% of the known biflorus complex grow in Turkey, and indeed 9 of these 12 are endemic to Turkey.

The area I have bounded above is roughly the size of Britain and being approximately on the same latitude as southern Spain shares the same mediterranean climate. This area contains and is bounded by high mountainous regions. The southern coastal plain is parallelled for its whole length by the Taurus mountains, sometimes reaching almost to the coast and at other points 20-30 kilometres distant. Generally speaking, it is to the mountains that we must go for Crocus, with few exceptions they are children of the alpine regions.

The Crocus biflorus complex has presented me with problems in assigning any particular plant to one of the described sspp, particularly plants growing around the centre of this region. I am not calling into question Brian's treatment of the complex (I wouldn't dare), but I am sure he would be the first to confirm that the whole picture has yet to emerge.

The problem arises from the fact that if you lay out on an herbarium sheet, the 'typical' forms of each of the sspp, there appears to be no problem about separation into different sspp. However when you begin to examine different examples from the extreme ends of variability within each sspp the differences begin to blur and break down.

I do not wish in this short article to get into a deep botanical discussion, but to illustrate the above statement would look at three of the sspp which grow in overlapping territories in the centre of the area I have described, namely crewei, nubigena and isauricus. All three of these have white or blue flowers sometimes with buff or gold tones and are typically striped externally in maroon. Crewei and nubigena have black anthers, and what separates them is fewer and wider leaves in crewei(2-3 leaves/1.5-2 mm wide) than in nubigena(3-8 leaves/.5-1.5 mm wide) Thus there is superficially no difference between a few wide leaved nubigena and a many narrow leaved crewei. Of course you can always whip out your stains, slides and microscope and do a quick chromosome count(2n=10 crewei/2n=12 nubigena)

It is when you introduce isauricus into the melee that the fun really starts. This is what I would call a fairly 'plastic' ssp which can have a chromosome count of 2n=8,10 or 12 so cannot be separated purely on that count. Whilst it has the same leaf configuration as nubigena, its main point of difference from the other 2 sspp should be yellow as opposed to black anthers with typically a greyish connective. However I have plants from Akseki in the central Taurus(which is well to the east of the territory of nubigena) which have black anthers and were growing with

populations of 'typical' isauricus. I also have plants from Goktepe in Mugla where nubigena and isauricus intergrade, which have black/yellow/grey anthers with and without grey connectives. (see 'The Crocus' p.82 under discussion of biflorus nubigena) Indeed these plants have every possible permutation of colour from pure white to dark blue with every conceivable type of stripe, speckle or freckle.

To thoroughly confuse matters, chrysanthus(biflorus in disguise) often grows with these plants, this crocus can also have white or blue flowers(typically yellow) and can also have yellow or black anthers. It has been described as hybridizing with biflorus sspp to produce x bornmuelleri. I have several examples of what purport to be x bornmuelleri from our general area, and unless they are predominantly yellow it is difficult to give them a name. Biflorus ssp punctatus also overlaps the ranges of the other three sspp and is differentiated by being described as speckled rather than striped, however crewei/nubigena/isauricus can also be speckled.

The other sspp growing within our area(biflorus, albocoronatus, tauri, wattiorum) are sufficiently distinct not to add to my confusion. The other four sspp found growing in Turkey, (pulchricolor, adamii, pseudonubigena, artvinensis) particularly the last three, share a lot of similarity with the sspp above described.

To sum up, Brian has done a masterly job separating the biflorus complex and enlightening the confusion which existed prior to his monograph. Unfortunately, on occasion, in south and west Turkey, both myself and the plants remain confused.

David B. Stephens
August 1995

CROCUS GROUP SEED EXCHANGE

The 1995 seed exchange is the fourth we have conducted and was the most successful yet. We were able to offer 135 different lots of Crocus seed representing 55% of all known Crocus donated by 20% of the membership. A further 10% of members joined in as non-donors, so nearly a third of the whole membership is active in participation in the seed exchange.

When it is considered that we invariably offer each year taxa that are new, rare and cannot be found on any seedlist elsewhere, then we can congratulate ourselves that we are doing a good job in making sure that the genus of our choice is being widely grown and protected in cultivation.

As usual I would urge all of our members to participate in the seed exchange and to help distribute and grow Crocus, particularly the less common forms. Growing Crocus from seed is very easy, getting seed from the exchange is even easier. Start hand pollinating your plants now for the 1996 seed exchange.

Good growing for the 1995/1996 season