

Crocus Group Newsletter

Spring 1997

Patron Brian Mathew
Committee Ray Cobb
Alan Edwards
Editor David Stephens
Secretary Ann Borrill

Members 135
UK 108
Overseas 27

Primrose Warburg

It is with great sadness that I have to write these words, recording the death on November 24th 1996 of our long standing, recently retired and much loved Hon Sec Primrose Warburg.

As a measure of the regard and fondness in which she was held, the little church at South Hinksey, Oxford was overflowing with friends and family filling the pews, the aisle and out of the door into the porch. The church was beautifully decorated using many of the flowers which Primrose would surely have chosen for any of her friends: Crocus, Colchicum, Cyclamen and snowdrops mingled with winter flowering viburnums, Mahonia and foliage plants. These were not all planty people, Primrose had many other interests and friends in those spheres; the British Heart Foundation, for example, for which she ran plant sales.

Primrose fostered our Group for many years, arranging for the production of the newsletter, garden visits and Crocus auctions to which she always donated generously, much preferring spring auctions since she held the view that crocuses were easy to move when in full growth. Her knowledge of the genus was good, as you would expect of a plantswoman of her standing, but she was certainly not a one genus person. Her interests encompassed irises - she gave equally generously to the Iris Species Group auctions - Galanthus, Narcissus, hellebores, smelly aroids and willows as well as many other interesting plants and her observations were well worth bearing in mind. On one visit she said to me 'people are always saying that Pacific Coast irises will not tolerate lime soil - rubbish, come and look at mine!'. Primrose always took the direct approach. Periodically I would be invited to check the identity of her hellebore species

collection and that did keep me on my toes: "Well if that is *H. multifidus*, what's that?!. The visits were fun, and I am sure that many Crocus Group members have enjoyed the visits to South Hayes in spring and autumn to see the drifts of naturalised crocuses and be revived by bowls of hot soup. Her plants had to be survivors and she admitted that she could not be bothered with cosseting plants in pots. A very impressive range of bulbs grew well, not just surviving, in the cold hilly garden.

I don't know whether Primrose started the interest in crocuses or if she inherited it from her husband, Prof.E.F.(Heff) Warburg who died in 1966 at the age of 58. He was a botanist of great standing at Oxford University, deeply involved with the Botanical Society of the British Isles and Vice President of the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Naturalists Trust (the Warburg Nature Reserve is named in his memory). Many will know his name as the co-author of the standard work on the British Flora known in the trade as 'CTW': Clapham, Tutin and Warburg's, Flora of the British Isles.

At the time of his death he was working on Crocus and Primrose told me that he had the intention of producing a monograph, but it was not to be. He did write a paper in Endeavour, October 1957 which indicated an in depth interest in the genus.

Together, over a period of 18 years, they created the garden at South Hayes and then Primrose carried it on for another 30 years. Her last letter to me, just one month before she died, noted that 'I've never had so many autumn crocuses, wide open in the sun'. I am so glad that it was a good year for her. I shall miss Primrose's occasional telephone calls which often began: 'I'm Primrose Warburg. I am

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going to Rhodes (Malta, Turkey etc.). Where can I find crocuses please? And it must be near a good beach'. She did enjoy the sun and swimming as well. The request was always terminated by 'Can I look for anything for you?' As a result of her sunbathing/plant hunting excursions we have her excellent white *Crocus longiflorus* from Malta; in typical generosity she gave me the only corm, but it soon increased well and I was able to pass the plant back to her, and on to others. I think perhaps it should be named in her memory. **Brian Mathew**

footnote. The Crocus Group has made a donation to the British Heart Foundation in memory of our friend and Hon. Sec.

South Hayes

As Brian says, Primrose created a very interesting garden where over the years many of us have received great hospitality. What is to be the future of the house and garden is a matter for the family, but in the short term they have very kindly agreed that the Crocus Group may visit to see the spring crocus and other plants. Those of us who knew Primrose also know that the garden holds a significant snowdrop collection planted out in wild woodland conditions, and many surprises are to be found round every corner.

So, whether you visited in the past or not, here is possibly the last chance to see Primroses garden. Details are on the back page.

Crocus Group Seedbank

In 1993 I sowed hundreds of seeds of *cvijicii*, *kotschyanus suworowianus*, *nevadensis* and other *Crocus taxa* that Jim Archibald had kindly sent me. He was clearing old seed out of his seedbank to make room for new stock. At the same time Jim also sowed many of these seeds himself, and both he and I can confirm that germination was rapid, consistent and nearly 100%. Some of this seed was very old, and records show that germination was better than when it had first been collected. This

was particularly true for *cvijicii* which had been a notably poor germinator when fresh.

Whilst it is unwise to draw any conclusions from this happy circumstance, it is probably safe to say that *Crocus* seed does not suffer from storage, and may possibly benefit.

This is good news for growers and collectors of *Crocus* seed. I would personally much prefer to sow successions of small quantities annually, than sow large quantities from the occasional glut. *Crocus* in the wild seems to set either no seed, or countless millions, and if you are there at the right time there is seedbank material for decades, whilst scarcely affecting the population. After this 1993 experience I set up my own seedbank for *Crocus* seed of known provenance from either myself or trusted friends. It was also one of my aspirations to try to establish a seedbank within the Crocus Group.

As most of you will have read, Helmut Kerndorff and Erich Pasche, two of our German members have just contributed two superb articles about *Crocus* in recent AGS Bulletins. In these articles they mention the Crocus Group, endorsing work with the seed exchange, and strongly urging that amongst other projects we should establish a seedbank of *Crocus taxa*. I, for one, obviously agree with them that this is one of the important tasks that we as an amateur Group should undertake.

To a limited extent, I am already doing something similar in that when I receive a large quantity of any particular *Crocus* seed for the Crocus Group Seed Exchange, I put any spare into a seedbank for subsequent years (this will be identified as seedbank material in future lists). This is however a long way from the ideal of establishing a permanent bank of *Crocus* seed of known provenance of all *taxa* in as many variations as possible, from which Group members can deposit and draw on request.

There are obvious problems in getting correct material from wild collections or properly controlled closed pollination in reasonable quantities, particularly of the rarer and more desirable *taxa* to start the seedbank going. However, if Group members are willing to deposit verified seed as and when available, I shall undertake to maintain our own seedbank. The logistics of how to operate it in future years can be worked out as we

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go along. Alternatively, any member who feels they could undertake this task, or has any views on how it should be done, please let me know. **DBS**

Crocus Sale/Auction

Until this year we have held an auction of Crocus material to help contribute to Group funds in the Spring after the Crocus lecture in the RHS Halls in London. Primrose held the view that they move perfectly well at that season, and whilst not disagreeing, most of us are loath to dig them up, or turn out pots at that stage. For this reason, the more logical time is during the dormant period for Crocus which can just about be extended to October and the Crocus Group Autumn Garden Visit.

We held our first autumn sale/auction on 20th October 1996 during the Autumn visit and it proved both popular and profitable to Crocus Group funds.

We sold 70 or so different lots of Crocus corms from 50 or more different taxa and made in the region of £80. The highlight of the event was the fierce auction of a corm of nudiflorus albus kindly donated by Joy Hulme which eventually went for £11. Whilst this may sound a lot of money, this plant is unobtainable, and there are probably less than 20 corms in existence.

Most of us replot sometime during the late summer, and if spare corms are kept dry or in only just moist peat or similar material, they can be brought to the Autumn Garden visit and sold or auctioned, so come along next Autumn with your spare corms to sell and buy. If you would like to donate corms to be sold, but cannot make it to the Autumn visit, then kindly send them to:-

David Stephens, Sherwood, Bunce Common Rd, Leigh, Surrey, RH2 8NS UK.

Membership List

You will find attached to this newsletter a list of Crocus Group members as at the date of publication. I do not think that the Group has produced a membership list before, so it is about time we came out, as it were!! If you think you

should be on the list but aren't, then let us know!!! Conversely, let us know if you do not wish to stay as a member, or if your address or other details are incorrect.

Ann Borrill

Seed exchange 1997

1996 saw the fifth seed exchange organised by the Crocus Group and as in previous years this was bigger and more successful than before. The 1996 seed list saw 60% of all recognised Crocus taxa listed and in the 5 years since the list started 75% of all taxa have been offered. If we carry on at this rate of success, it is foreseeable that seed of most, if not all, Crocus will be listed every year. Certainly, if we could get to the stage where we routinely list seed of the rarer and less common forms in cultivation then this would be a most worthwhile objective to aid conservation by cultivation, so keep out those paintbrushes for a full season of hand pollination, particularly of the rarer taxa. To remind you of the rules, send seed and/or a SSAE (no stamp needed overseas) for the seedlist before 31st July 1997 to:
David Stephens, Sherwood, Bunce Common Rd, Leigh, Surrey, RH2 8NS UK.

Crocus Notes

Crocus speciosus ssp xantholaimos is distinguished from ssp speciosus by its yellow throat and smaller stature. It has proved to be an easily grown plant in pots and may well settle down in the open garden, although I have not yet tried it there. Some of the plants in cultivation in the UK have been raised from seed provided by Erich Pasche. It now appears that several of these seed raised populations contain individuals with white anthers and so look remarkably like Crocus pulchellus. However, close examination shows that the venation of the perianth segments resembles that of speciosus rather than that of pulchellus. Moreover, the specimens I have examined do not have pubescent filaments as does pulchellus.

It seems likely that the white anthered plants result from hybridisation between speciosus xantholaimos

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and pulchellus. This must have occurred in Herr Pasche's garden as the two species do not occur together in the wild. The alternative explanation is that speciosus xantholaimos can have white anthers, but this can only be resolved by observations of wild populations. Further comments on this matter from members of the Crocus Group would be welcome.

Ray Cobb

To add to what Ray has written above, I would comment that I know of at least three different sets of plants that have been independently raised from seed from this source and I too have such plants raised from seed labelled AHEP8324. However, unlike Ray's plants those I have examined had pubescent throats and pubescent filaments and the styles were sparsely branched (c.8) and were shorter than the white anthers. All this closely suggests a strong relationship to pulchellus (BM is strangely silent about the nature of pulchellus styles in The Crocus) although in its entirety the plant does not look quite right to be pulchellus, and in any case that does not explain the percentage of the population which have yellow anthers. Perhaps Erich may care to speculate on what is happening here.

DBS

Random thoughts on seed treatment

Pursuing the theme of raising Crocuses from seed, I would suggest that this means of propagation and increase is especially rewarding due to the ability of seedlings, when well grown, to produce flowers within three years of sowing. Very few monocots can rival this pace of maturation, so the genus Crocus is ideally suited to the impatient grower or ancients like myself who can remember the day Edward the VIth abdicated!! An example that comes to mind is vallicola. I sowed the seeds straight from the ripened capsules into a 3" pot on 1.6.94 and germination was 3/4 months later. The small corms were planted out the following summer on a raised ericaceous bed and flowered in mid August 1996, just over two years from sowing.

Others that have flowered before the 3rd year from sowing include:-

1. serotinus JCA348.602 from Sierra Nevada in 1990 and sowed ex seedbank on 21.12.93, first flowering on 24.9.96.
2. laevigatus JCA347.400 from Evvia in 1985 and sowed ex seedbank on 21.12.93, first flowering on 1.11.96.
3. gilanicus (no provenance) sown on 5.9.94, first flowering 2.11.96.

Regarding the question of seedbank material, there is clearly a good case and I endorse the view that seed does not appear to lose any significant viability by a lengthy sojourn in the 'fridge'. However, when one has access to fresh seed (such as from the Crocus Group Seed Exchange) there is nothing to be gained from storing it. I prefer to mimic nature and sow my newly ripened seed without delay in the period during which the capsules mature, regardless of whether they are autumnal or vernal species.

Alan Edwards

Garden visits

Sunday 9th February 1997

come to the National Crocus Collection held by David Stephens where also the crocuses grown by Alan Edwards will be on display, then on to the Crocus Collection held at Wisley Gardens.

1100 arrive at David Stephens
Sherwood
Bunce Common Road
Leigh Surrey
tel.01306 611420

then on to Wisley Gardens
where Gill Skilton will meet us at
1300 at the front gates and take us
behind the scenes

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Sunday 16th February 1997

come to the other National Crocus Collection held
by Ray Cobb.

1030 arrive at Ray & Sylvia Cobb
Aurelia
188 Bramcote Lane
Wollaton Nottingham

tel.0115 928 1525 to check on weather and
flowering conditions and to let Ray know if you
intend to come. Sylvia will graciously provide tea
and coffee, but as usual bring your own packed
lunch, or get something at the pub down the road.

Sunday 23rd February 1997

a special visit to South Hayes to see possibly for the
last time the garden where Primrose made welcome
so many of us with a love for crocuses, snowdrops
and other plants. With the permission of the family,
John Grimshaw, one of our members has access to
the house and garden, and would welcome visitors
from 1100. John will happily provide tea and
coffee, and has even offered to find some soup for
lunch, although as usual, bring your own
sandwiches. Would you please let John know if you
intend to visit on 01865 247883

1100 arrive at South Hayes
Yarnells Hill
Oxford

Mr & Mrs F Address 15 West Common Grove Harpenden Herts AL5 2AJ
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Mr J Lee 25 Douglas Drive Old Drumchapel Glasgow G15 6SW
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