

Crocuses

There's much more to crocuses than the welcome sight of large white, yellow and purple flowers carpeting parks and squares in spring. Some sweet-smelling spring and autumn species, with their subtle shades and shapes should be prominently displayed as container grown trophies.

Crocuses hail from Turkey and the eastern Mediterranean, so, by and large, require a hot, sunny spot and very gritty soil. I've even seen a *Crocus hadriaticus* growing out of a crack in a rock, so the general rule for a lot of species, like *C. Vernus* and its many cultivars, is to give them these growing conditions. A 6mm grit mulch is worthwhile. The flowers need full spring sun and the ripening corms should bake over the summer.

Fortunately, some species crocuses do bend these rules a little. *C. Etruscus* will cope with the semi-shade and damper conditions of deciduous woods. Without a leafy canopy in spring, the bulbs get just enough sun for their flowers to open. So, if you have any spots beneath deciduous trees that the spring sun can reach, you'll still be able to enjoy the fine lilac-grey flowers of *C. Etruscus*. Check round the garden in spring to identify the likely places, and mark where to plant some crocuses in the autumn.

Another attractive species that can handle some shade is *Crocus pulchellus*. This beauty can have pale, lightly veined violet petals with a touch of yellow at the throat and, when fully open, displays a pale yellow-orange style. It was first described by the Rev. William Herbert in 1841, when he wrote to the British Consul in Constantinople to 'have the kindness to send some person into the forest of Belgrad'¹ to find some specimens for him. *C. Pulchellus* goes a step further: it will tolerate planting in lightly grassed areas. A thick, overly fed lawn will be too much for it, but a more typical, slightly sparse bit of grass would be just fine, with the proviso that you don't cut the grass for at least a couple of weeks after the foliage has died back.

If you have this kind of grass cover, several other crocuses will thrive, including *C. Tommasinianus* 'Ruby Giant'. It is neither ruby nor a giant but its deep crimson petals do make it pretty striking. The petals are wider than usual and are faintly stippled with pale streaks. *C x luteus* 'Golden Yellow' also does well in a grassy environment and its strong scent provides an added bonus. Unfortunately, like all yellow crocuses, it so often falls victim to the unwelcome attention of birds. I find it dispiriting enough when the wind decapitates a cracking display of flowers. One day it looks as if spring has arrived and the next morning you encounter a battlefield of fallen flowers. Birds on top of this make me steer clear of these lovely yellows.

Perhaps I should reverse this policy. The brilliant gold of *C. flavus* subsp. *flavus* nearly makes me do so. This was the first yellow crocus in Europe and destructive bird beaks have been at it from the outset. Writing in the 'Botanical Magazine' in 1787, William Curtis says: "We have succeeded in keeping these birds off by placing near the object to be preserved the skin of a cat, properly stuffed."

Another problem when you're intent on enjoying your crocuses is mud. With low-growing plants, I need to get down on my hunkers to see them properly, and soggy, slithery mud is certainly an offput, especially with the autumn flowering species. I find the best way of avoiding wet knees is to pot them up and site them on a table or the wall next to the herb garden. Who could resist *C. Longiflorus*, shown off this way? Admittedly its leaves come first, slightly masking the wonderful pale mauve flower, but with its striking yellow anthers surrounding an orange stigma, and an amazingly strong scent, the obtrusive foliage is the least of it. Another autumn crocus worth looking out for is *C. speciosus*. It comes in several different shades, but I have to

confess to preferring 'Conqueror'. It's 6 petal flowers last well and open magnificently with a bit of sun. The blue-mauve flowers have pale lines on the outside and are veined inside. Delightful!

You can also plant out some autumn crocuses and thwart any wee rodents that are only too keen to feast on the corms, by growing some in pots and then sinking into a border, once the earlier flowers are over. *C. Medius* is a good candidate for this. With its bright purple flowers and impressively tall, branched style, it's well worth showing off on a window ledge, but responds well to being sunk in a border, after spending the summer in a baking hot place.

If you're tempted to diversify into autumn crocuses or widen your selection, a good source is Kevock Nursery, 16 Kevock Road, Lasswade, Midlothian. They open under Scotland's Gardens Scheme and post a bulb catalogue on their website: <http://www.kevockgarden.co.uk/>

¹ 'Bulbs' Anna Pavord 2009. Mitchell Beazely.