

The Herbalist

By Dr. Kathy Girard, URI Master Gardener



Saffron (*Crocus sativus*; Family: Iridaceae)

Saffron is a tiny, 6-inch plant that is grown from a corm. Its narrow, green, grass-like leaves appear in summer. As fall approaches, lovely lilac flowers with prominent orange stigmas appear. It is the stigmas that are dried to make a very expensive culinary seasoning and coloring agent. It takes 60,000 stigmas to make a pound...and collection must be done by hand.

Modern saffron is a hybrid and does not set seed. Although cultivars are rarely mentioned, a better producer for northern gardens is *Crocus sativus*

'Cashmirianus.' Buy corms from a reputable seed house and be sure what is purchased is *C. sativus*, **not** *Colchicum autumnale*, sometimes confusingly called saffron crocus.

Saffron can be grown in cold climates. Corms should be planted 6 inches deep and 6 inches apart in a sheltered location or in planter boxes in late July to early August. The soil should be light and rich. The corms need excellent drainage and where they are propagated successfully are divided and moved to new locations every three years. Carefully mark the area where they are planted so they won't be dug up in the spring when beds are prepared.

Crocus sativa originated in Asia Minor and was introduced to Europe by the Arabs as a seasoning and a dye plant. The Arabs named it "Zaffer" (from the Arabic zafaron, meaning yellow) or saffron while the ancient Greeks and Romans called it Krokos or Kardom, respectively. According to Greek myth, the mortal Crocos fell in love with the beautiful nymph, Similax. When Crocos was rebuffed by her he turned into the beautiful purple crocus flower.

As a dye saffron was used to color royal shoes and liturgical robes a deep yellow. The pungent, prized scent of saffron water was sprinkled on the benches of theatres while crocus leaves were strewn on banquet hall floors and used to stuff cushions. Although it was once used as a medicinal herb, saffron is most used today as a culinary seasoning.