KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good at It

“Colchicum and Saffron Crocus”

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While most gardeners are familiar with spring-flowering bulbs, such as tulips and daffodils, many don't realize that some bulbs actually bloom in the fall. Fall-blooming bulbs make unexpected, colorful additions to the fall garden. The attractive flowers of fall-blooming colchicum and saffron crocus make welcome additions to the fall garden.

Colchicums are members of the lily family and not to be ingested as they have toxic qualities for both you and your pets. If it is any consolation, deer do not favor colchicums for the same reason. Colchicum plants are sterile male triploids meaning they cannot reproduce via seed, but must be propagated through their bulb-like root structure called corms. The leaves of most colchicums emerge in early spring and die back by early summer. Crocus-like flowers appear without foliage in fall. They are also known as the autumn or meadow crocus.

The autumn crocus should be planted in in well-drained soil- late summer or early fall- in full sun to partial shade. Good planting sites include naturalized areas under the filtered shade of large trees and shrubs, in rock gardens, or amongst low-growing groundcovers. For the best visual display, plant colchicums in clumps. Corms should be planted 2 to 3 inches deep and 6 inches apart. Colchicums are hardy to USDA Hardiness Zone 5 so are a good choice for our Central Oregon climate.

This year I am investing my time and effort to introducing the edible Saffron Crocus into my garden. Though I am fortunate to have consistent flow of saffron in my kitchen from begging my family and friends to bring the spice home from their trips abroad, I seem to always run low when I most want that color and flavor that only saffron can add to my culinary creations.

The saffron crocus is a small plant with several slim, green grass-like leaves growing from a globe-shaped corm. Plants reach 6 to 12 inches tall, and 2 to 4 inches wide. Each plant produces 2 to 4 large lavender to violet-blue flowers, with a sweet, hay-like fragrance. Their leaves appear in early spring and grow until hot weather induces summer dormancy. A second crop of leaves appear in fall, followed shortly by flowers.

Flowers are the key to saffron production. Each flower is made up of the showy outer violet-blue petals. Inside the petals are three short, yellowish male pollen structures called stamens, and three very long blood-red stigmas. They are the female pollen receptors. The stigmas are harvested with tweezers, shortly after the flowers open.

Plants are hardy in Zones 5-8, and prefer full to partial sun. For best plant growth, choose a protected planting site that gets at least five or six hours of direct sunlight per day.

Saffron crocus require well-drained soil, especially in winter. Amending the soil before planting will protect against bulb rot. Plant the corms about 2 inches deep in groupings. The flat side of the corm, where the roots and growth plate are located, should be pointed down in the planting hole. Plants are quite drought tolerant once established, so don't overwater!

If your site is good, and the plants are healthy, they will multiply fairly rapidly. Dig up and divide the corms every 2 to 5 years, during their late July or August dormant period.

Finally, finding saffron crocus can be tricky. Not many garden centers carry a specialty bulb like saffron crocus, so you may need to order them through a specialty bulb catalogue if you can't find them locally.

Begin browsing now through bulb catalogs and garden centers for colchicums and saffron crocus. They make spectacular additions to the fall landscape.

For more information on the autumn crocus, and the edible saffron crocus go to our Master Gardener website at [www.gocomga.com](http://www.gocomga.com) and click the KPOV tab on the orange bar. Thanks for listening to… “Gardening Get Good at It” on KPOV, The Point.

Resources:

Autumn Crocus

<https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/mastergardener/files/2015/12/Colchicums.pdf>

Colchicums

<https://hortnews.extension.iastate.edu/2000/7-28-2000/colchicums.html>

Fall Blooming Bulbs

<https://hortnews.extension.iastate.edu/1996/10-11-1996/fallbulbs.html>

Saffron Crocus

<https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0844/5779/files/Planting_And_Care_-_Saffron_Crocus.pdf?3232677798842726033>

Growing Saffron Crocus

<https://lancaster.unl.edu/hort/articles/2013/SaffronCrocus.shtml>