

Crocus

Gardening books say the best time to plant spring flowering bulbs is in between April and May, before the first expected frost, as this allows the bulb to develop a root system before going dormant. So no time is like now to plant bulbs and look forward to spring.

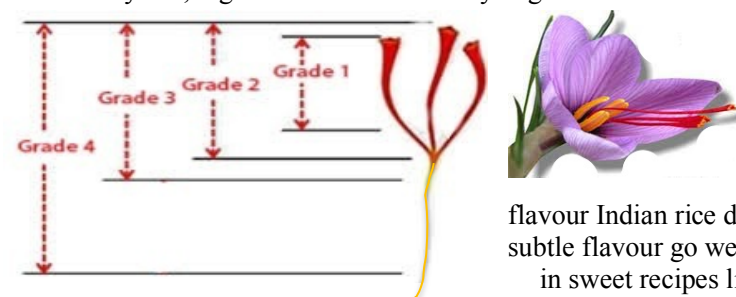
A carpet of crocus makes for a wonderful showstopper. Blooming in white, yellow, orange, purple, lilac, crocuses are among the first bright surprise in early spring, these hardy little fellows also do well in the rock garden, in planters and window boxes.

Crocuses are in the Iris family, long thought to have 80 species in the genus, however lately the count has come close to 100. Their natural distribution extends from central Europe to northern Africa and central Asia. These low-growing, herbaceous, lily-like perennials produce dainty goblet-shaped blooms which, depending on the species, are either accompanied by, or followed by, wispy grass-like foliage. The botanical term 'crocus' is derived from the Greek 'kroki', which means 'thread', this refers to the thread-shaped stigma of the plant *Crocus Sativus*, the source of the spice saffron. In general crocus species can be divided into spring flowering – the flowers appearing before the new leaves; and autumn flowering – the flowers blooming in full leaf. After the plant finishes blooming, its foliage, through photosynthesis, creates nutrients that the bulb will be needing for its next growing season, so it is wise to follow garden experts' advice to remove foliage only after it dies back.

Crocuses actually sprout from corms, although the term crocus bulbs is often used. Corms can be planted just about anywhere as long as they get full to partial sun and well-drained soil. They are good to go under deciduous trees, where they will get enough sunlight before the trees are in full leaf. Place them about 10cm deep and 12cm apart, with their pointy ends up. Once planted, they need no further care and will give you pleasure for years on end as they multiply each year. Propagation is by dividing established clumps.

Saffron: The spice saffron comes from the flower of *Crocus Sativus*. It is believed that the plant originated and was first cultivated in Greece, however, Iran has also been suggested. This is a small autumn flowering plant, its unassuming purple flower is the only part easily seen above the ground. The red, three-pronged stigma, when handpicked from each flower and spread out to dry will become what we know as the spice saffron. An estimated 150,000 flowers are required to make 1kg of saffron, this labour intensive effort makes saffron the most expensive spice. You need a cool Mediterranean climate to grow saffron, in Australia, that's Tasmania, western Victoria, elevated parts of South Australia and areas of western NSW.

Saffron is used in domestic economy as well as in medicine and the arts. Prehistoric cave paintings revealed the use of saffron pigments. Arab traders introduced saffron to Spain, and from there it assimilated into the cuisines along the Mediterranean, then it spread to Britain where it was extensively grown in Essex, in the town of Saffron Walden (renamed from Chipping Walden), its coat of arms bore three saffron flowers pictured with its turreted walls. Saffron Hill, now a London thoroughfare was once part of the gardens where quantities of saffron were grown. Saffron production from Essex thrived for some 400 years, together with the fabric dyeing industries that developed in the same area.



Different grades of saffron strength that range from grade four, being the worst to grade one being the best.

industry, saffron is used in perfumes and dyes. In medicine, saffron is used as a sedative, diaphoretic, antispasmodic, and expectorant. Saffron 'tea' flavoured with brandy is believed to be an old domestic remedy for measles. Some medical scientists believe that extracts from saffron can lower blood pressure, stimulate respiration and constrict blood vessels.

The 14-week Saffron War of 1374: The Black Death crisis in Europe caused the demand for medicinal saffron to skyrocket and local supplies were soon exhausted. Arab was unwilling to trade (most probably due to hostilities over the crusades). This left Greece as Europe's primary supplier. Saffron merchants became wealthy and powerful, which disturbed the declining aristocracy. As a desperate effort to retain lost prominence, a group of nobles hijacked a huge saffron shipment bound for Basel, Switzerland. The theft triggered a 14 week long war, named the 'Saffron War'. That shipment was eventually returned to its rightful owners, but the trade later was subject to mass piracy. Adulterated goods also made the rounds, typical methods included mixing with cheaper plant fibres, and/or dousing fibres with honey, all to add quick and cheap bulk. In the powder form – more prone to adulteration – plant materials such as turmeric, paprika and other artificial colorants were used to maintain colour strength. Saffron adulteration was dangerous business to fool with, according to old record, conviction carried the death penalty, offenders were burnt at the stake, along with their bags of impure saffron!

