

## LINE OF FIRE

Boxed numbers in the text refer to the following crocosmias contained in Mark Fox's collection:

- 1 *C. 'Highlight'*
- 2 *Crocosmia x crocosmiiflora 'Pepper'*
- 3 *C. x crocosmiiflora 'Burford Bronze'*
- 4 *C. 'Comet' (syn. 'Malahide')*
- 5 *C. x crocosmiiflora 'Little Redhead'*
- 6 *C. x crocosmiiflora 'Coleton Fishacre'*
- 7 *C. x crocosmiiflora 'Joey Hoey'*
- 8 *C. paniculata 'Cally Greyleaf'*
- 9 *C. 'Okavango'*
- 10 *C. 'Orange Devil'*
- 11 *C. 'Krakatoa'*
- 12 *C. Bright Eyes ('Walbreyes')*



# CROCOSMIA CARNIVAL

Few gardeners are aware of the tremendous range of crocosmias now available. **Phil Clayton** visits the Lincolnshire garden of National Plant Collection Holder Mark Fox to learn more about these wonderful late-summer-flowering, bulbous perennials. Photography by Tim Sandall





**FLORAL FANFARE** Mark Fox (above left) with one of the 270 different crocosmias in the National Plant Collection that he grows in his and his next-door neighbour's garden in Caistor, Lincolnshire. Most of his plants are grown in containers, to make best use of his limited growing space; it also helps keep different selections separate. In August (opposite page), they make an arresting sight

**THERE SEEM TO BE** certain plants people begin gardening with; tough dependables donated from friends' gardens, such as seedling *Aquilegia*, divisions of *Geranium* or, often, generous clumps of a plant with strappy foliage and rather exotic, orange-red flowers, known to most as montbretia.

This plant is undeniably useful, growing (even thriving) in problem places such as dry shade, but to those in wetter, warmer regions such as Ireland or Cornwall, it is also a pestilential weed, rampaging through gardens and countryside alike.

Yet there is much more to *Crocosmia*. It is unfortunate so many gardeners' experience of this genus of summer-flowering, South African bulbous perennials begins (and as a result often ends) with a plant that is atypical of the vast majority of other selections. In recent years some of these have been widely offered – especially upstanding *C. 'Lucifer'*, bred by nurseryman Alan Bloom in 1969, loved by many growers for its tall habit, reaching 1.2m (4ft) and producing elegant sprays of rich-red blooms fairly early in the season.

#### Fallen angel

*Crocosmia 'Lucifer'* grew in the garden of the house in Caistor, Lincolnshire, to which Mark Fox moved in 1988. It performed so well there that he began to gather as many other selections as he could find, firstly at local garden centres, later online. Before he knew it, he was hooked. That was 10 years ago; Mark has now amassed more than 270 selections and is a National Plant Collection Holder.

The garden is like that of many Victorian terraced homes: long (64m/210ft) but narrow. He is, however, lucky to be able to use the end-of-terrace garden of his neighbour, thereby effectively doubling the area and improving access. Mark's original garden is set out and planted in a traditional manner with a grass path and narrow borders filled with

plants that complement his crocosmias such as dark-leaved *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo' or unusual *Buddleja x weyeriana* 'Bicolor', its violet flowers centred with orange. What makes his crocosmia collection remarkable, though, is that most are container-grown: simple plastic pots set in rows that cover much of the rest of the site.

'I have no space left for growing in the open ground,' Mark says. 'If they were all planted I'd need about half an acre. Growing in pots means the plants can be easily moved about and helps keep selections separate – this way I can fit more in.' One drawback is that many plants need to be repotted virtually every year, although this does allow Mark to keep a close eye on his plants' progress. When I visited the garden at flowering time in August, the sight was quite extraordinary. His collection provides a fiery sea composed of myriad tones: pale yellow through burnt orange to red and almost purplish-red; the containers below almost concealed by the lush top growth.

#### Wild parents

Garden hybrids of *Crocosmia* are derived largely from four species: those close to *C. paniculata* tend to be tall growing with spear-like, pleated leaves, flowerheads held above on stout stems. Elegant *C. masoniorum*

brings its attractive arching panicles of large flowers into the gene pool and *C. pottsii*, while smaller in height and flower size, has branched flower stems bearing numerous blooms. Another smaller growing and rather tender species, *C. aurea*, has large yellow flowers with often reflexed petals. *Crocosmia x crocosmiiflora* (montbretia) is a primary hybrid (hence its tremendous vigour) between the last two.

Marks calls montbretia the 'thug of the crocosmia world' and feels it has given the genus a bad reputation. 'People don't understand these plants – they just assume they spread everywhere like montbretia, but most are so well behaved, growing in neat clumps. They really are misunderstood, underrated and many are simply unknown.'

Many fine hybrids were developed around the turn of the 20th century; some have been lost, the naming of others has become confused. Lately, increased interest in them has resulted in many older cultivars becoming more widely available (though not always correctly named), as well as some excellent new selections. In recent years, those with bronze-coloured foliage have become popular, providing an attractive foil for the brightly coloured blooms.

#### Choosing favourites

So which are Mark's favourites? He groans and replies that there are so many to choose from. He first singles out *C. x crocosmiiflora* 'Pepper' <sup>2</sup>, one I spied soon after arriving simply because it looked so distinctive. The blooms have a creamish background on which it looks as if someone

has splattered orange paint, giving the flowers a speckled appearance. This plant reaches around 60cm (24in). Sultry *C. x crocosmiiflora* 'Sultan', growing to 70cm (28in), is a bronze-leaved selection with rich red blooms that have a yellow eye and a central maroon blotch.

His third choice is an amazing plant. Named *C. 'Paul's Best Yellow'*, it is a recent cultivar with huge, clear yellow flowers more than 9cm (3in) across, held in arching panicles – really spectacular when in bloom.

Quite distinct is impressive *C. paniculata* 'Cally Greyleaf' <sup>8</sup> selected by plantsman Michael Wickenden of Cally Gardens, Dumfries and Galloway. Its parentage is clear, with stout stems holding panicles of slender, burnt-orange flowers above grey-green leaves; it stands at 1.2m (4ft) or more.

Others here also stood out. *Crocosmia x crocosmiiflora* 'Mephistopheles' dates from 1925 and has large, beautifully formed flowers of glowing red and orange on a fairly high plant some 75cm (30in) tall. Lovely *C. 'Highlight'* <sup>1</sup> is similar in appearance to *C. masoniorum*, its soft orange blooms each with a yellow eye held on arching panicles. Also of note, *C. 'Orange Devil'* <sup>10</sup> has open, almost spidery, rich orange blooms held in panicles atop tall stems.

Mark is trying a little breeding work of his own. Currently he has around 60 seedlings growing on from crosses he has made and is waiting to see which, if any, will be worthy of naming once they have settled down.

#### Keeping them happy

Most crocosmias are straightforward to grow, though they do vary in vigour; Mark states that among the most vigorous are good old *C. 'Lucifer'*, and *C. x crocosmiiflora* 'Joey Hoey' <sup>7</sup> which resembles a refined montbretia. Bronze-leaved selections are often tricky: those such as *C. x crocosmiiflora* 'Nigricans', an old pale yellow cultivar, or aptly named *C. x crocosmiiflora* 'Dusky Maiden' (one I have unsuccessfully tried to please) with rust-orange and almost purplish blooms. Many are quite tender and slow to bulk up – the best bet, Mark feels, is to give them good drainage, a warm, sunny spot and to keep an eye on watering. Some, however, such as pale orange *C. x crocosmiiflora* 'Coletton Fishacre' <sup>6</sup> (syn. 'Darkleaf Apricot') are easier to keep.

Many crocosmias are hardy in winter so long as they are in a sheltered spot and do not get too wet, though most do like plenty of water in the growing season. It is best to provide a thick winter mulch of garden compost in colder areas or for more delicate selections. As Mark grows his in pots, he takes particular care: most are overwintered in a polytunnel, with the most precious or tender ones brought into a conservatory.

Mark has met a great many people since beginning his collection. The garden is open for both Plant Heritage

(formerly NCCPG) and the National Gardens Scheme, and he welcomes visitors by appointment. He also seems to have spread his enthusiasm for these plants far and wide: there is always the possibility that a previously unknown or lost selection could be found in some garden somewhere. 'I've got people looking for crocosmias for me from Cornwall to the tip of Scotland,' Mark says with a laugh. His ultimate aim is to breed a white crocosmia. 'It could be possible as some have flowers with cream in them – then I really would make my million.' Millions or not, I cannot see Mark abandoning his beloved crocosmias any time soon. ■

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**i Crocosmia Garden**, 9 North Street, Caistor, Lincolnshire LN7 6QU; 01472 859269; www.simplesite.com/crocosmia.  
● The garden is open but by appointment only



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