

A chorus of CROCUS

Although deservedly among the most popular of all bulbous plants, many species and selections of crocus are seldom seen. **Brian Mathew** describes some of his favourites, many of which are in a soon-to-finish RHS trial. Photography by Tim Sandall

The crocus trial at RHS Garden Wisley includes plants seldom seen in gardens today. *Crocus* 'Margot' (main photograph) with its two-tone purple flowers has proved popular with visitors – it came second in a poll, behind well-known white *C.* 'Jeanne d'Arc'.
 • Others in the trial include white *C. malyi* 'Ballerina' 1 and *C.* 'Blue Pearl' 2 (right)

WHEN I WAS INVOLVED in a detailed botanical study of *Crocus* some years ago, a sceptical colleague commented, hopefully with tongue-in-cheek, that surely there were only three species: yellow, purple and white. In fact there are more than 80, flowering in spring or autumn, each with a wide range of interesting and colourful variations. To evaluate their garden value the RHS is running a trial of spring-flowering crocuses at RHS Garden Wisley. More than 150 entries are being assessed by a panel from the Rock Garden Plant Committee over a four-year period, ending this year.

Why hold a trial?
 The primary aim of the trial is to ascertain which spring-flowering *Crocus* are 'the best' for garden use and to select those for the accolade of an Award of Garden Merit (AGM). The many cultivars of 'large Dutch' crocuses, derived from European *C. vernus*, are excluded as these robust plants are more suited to mass displays in parks and public gardens where dramatic swaths of mixed purple and white cultivars are a delight in early spring. Apart from assessment for an AGM there are additional benefits from

accumulating a collection for trial. Some stocks might prove susceptible to disease while others might be inferior selections of species with more desirable variations. The authenticity of names can also be checked and corrected if necessary, ensuring cultivars are defined accurately through written descriptions, photographs and herbarium specimens. Trials are also an added attraction for visitors to the garden.

History of hybrids
 Among the most popular of smaller crocuses are selections and hybrids of blue or white *C. biflorus* and yellow *C. chrysanthus*. These have a wide natural distribution from Italy to Iran, are variable and, given the chance, will hybridize – factors that have been exploited by gardeners and nurserymen. Both species were known long ago: Philip Miller described *C. biflorus* in the mid-18th century and William Herbert named *C. chrysanthus* in the 19th, but it was not until the last century that their potential was realised and horticultural selections appeared. It is appropriate that one of the *C. chrysanthus* cultivars is named 'E.A. Bowles' for it was that same great horticulturist who was ►



SPRING TO LIFE Among the spring-flowering crocus being trialled at RHS Garden Wisley are:

- 3 *Crocus* 'Snow Bunting'
- 4 *Crocus chrysanthus* 'Zwanenburg Bronze'
- 5 *Crocus* 'Ruby Giant'
- 6 *Crocus* 'Aubade'
- 7 *Crocus* x *luteus* 'Stellaris'
- 8 *Crocus* 'Vanguard'

instrumental in bringing them to the notice of the gardening world, notably through his classic *A Handbook of Crocus and Colchicum for Gardeners* (1924, revised in 1952). In this he describes finding a seedling of *C. biflorus* in his rock garden in 1901 'unlike anything else'. This became the first of a series, several of which were named after birds. Although many were of his own raising, Bowles acknowledged the work of Thomas Hoog of Dutch firm van Tubergen who, in his opinion, raised 'the best seedlings of all' – including the large butter-yellow cultivar named *C. chrysanthus* 'E.A. Bowles'. Another commemorates Hoog's nursery: *C. chrysanthus* 'Zwanenburg Bronze' 4 (yellow with a bronze exterior). Bowles regarded his own *C. 'Snow Bunting'* 3 as the best white-flowered cultivar: it is

'PROBABLY THE MOST FAMILIAR IS *CROCUS TOMMASINIANUS*, OFTEN THE FIRST TO FLOWER'

still freely available and holds an AGM.

By the mid-20th century many new selections and hybrids had appeared. The firm of GH Hageman of Heemstede gave us some superb cultivars such as *C. chrysanthus* 'Cream Beauty', *C. 'Blue Bird'*, *C. 'Blue Pearl'* 2, *C. 'Ladykiller'*,

C. 'Gipsy Girl', *C. 'Advance'*, *C. 'Prinses Beatrix'* and *C. 'Saturnus'*, all of which more than 50 years on are listed in *RHS Plant Finder*. The Dutch nursery CM Berbee of Stolpen produced *C. 'Ard Schenk'*, *C. 'Aubade'* 6 and *C. 'Prins Claus'*, while van Eeden of Noordwijk raised *C. 'Elegance'* and *C. 'Zenith'*. All are in the trial.

Other species to try

Besides these, probably the most familiar is *C. tommasinianus*, often the first to flower and notable for its ability to seed prolifically. Although this may be a problem for tidy gardeners, it is usually tolerated as its lavender flowers are delightful on a sunny February day and its leaves soon die off. The standard form has pale flowers but there are many variants, and seeding colonies will produce more combinations. There are darker violet selections such as 'Whitewell Purple', kinds with dark tips such as 'Pictus', pinkish-flowered 'Roseus' and white 'Albus' or 'Eric Smith'. Occasionally *C. tommasinianus* crosses with *C. vernus* to produce plants such as deep purple *C. 'Ruby Giant'* 5, a strong grower but nicely compact. Silvery-lavender *C. 'Vanguard'* 8, on the other hand, has blooms more the size of the Dutch *C. vernus* cultivars, with greyish-white on the exterior.

Another familiar crocus is a large bright yellow, *C. x luteus* 'GoldenYellow', an old hybrid between Crimean *C. angustifolius* and Balkan *C. flavus*. Being sterile, it can increase only by vegetative means but this it does with great vigour and soon produces large, free-flowering clumps. The presence of *C. angustifolius* in its parentage can be detected by dark stripes near the base of the flower, a characteristic more pronounced in another cross, *C. x luteus* 'Stellaris' 7, which has striking bronze stripes. Both of these hybrids impressed the panel of assessors.

In purple and violet shades, Greek *C. sieberi* is worthwhile, opening to mid-lilac with a deep yellow centre and with a honey perfume. More striking is *C. sieberi* subsp. *sublimis* 'Tricolor' from the mountains of the Peloponnese, the dark-coloured flowers of which have a white band separating the purple from the yellow throat. Further variants of this easy species are *C. sieberi* 'Bowles' White', arguably the best white spring crocus, *C. sieberi* 'Hubert Edelsten', and *C. sieberi* 'George', both purple with a jagged white band outside.

Italian *C. etruscus*, the most frequently seen version of which is *C. etruscus* 'Zwanenburg', is an easily grown mid-lilac crocus which has darker flecking on the petals, usually an indication of

virus troubles – although the plant flowers freely and does not lack vigour. Italy is also home to *C. imperati*, a species that always surprises when its flowers open. When tightly furled they are a biscuit-like colour but once the buds crack open an intense purple interior is revealed, with a central yellow 'eye'. Comparable *C. imperati* subsp. *suaveolens* is also sometimes offered.

Mediterranean delicacies

The neighbouring islands of Corsica and Sardinia are home to diminutive versions of these in *C. corsicus* and *C. minimus*, both better suited to cultivation under cold glass due to their size. They have a similar colour arrangement to *C. imperati*, usually pale outside and purple within, but *C. minimus* often has a darker violet exterior; *C. minimus* 'Bavella' is quite remarkable in this respect, almost black outside. A distant relative of this group from southern France, *C. versicolor*, was unfortunately not well represented in the trial. In the 18th and 19th centuries there were many named selections but these have disappeared, only *C. versicolor* 'Picturatus' appearing regularly in catalogues. This has white flowers, nicely striped purple-brown on the outside, but the species occurs in many shades of lilac with variable markings.

From the Balkan Mountains across

the Adriatic Sea comes lovely white *C. malyi*. It has contrasting long, orange-red stigmas showing up well against creamy petals and often with a bluish or brownish exterior stain on the flower tube; *C. malyi* 'Sveti Roc' and *C. malyi* 'Ballerina' 1 both show this.

Other interesting species worthy of note include natives of Turkey. Little *C. pestalozzae* has white or blue flowers marked inside with black specks in the throat. Perhaps the most remarkable colour of all is that of *C. baytopiorum*, which is an extraordinary shade of clear pale blue. In the orange-yellow spectrum *C. gargaricus* and *C. olivieri* are among the most brilliant, the latter with wide, white-striped leaves.

The shimmering colours, delicacy, and fascinating variation of crocus flowers, opening just after the drudgery of winter, make them essential – so much so that once the crocus bug has taken hold, many growers find it impossible to resist. ■

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i The crocus trial can be seen on the trials field at RHS Garden Wisley. It should be at its best between mid-February and early March. For more on trials, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/plants/plant-trials-and-awards

GROWING CROCUS

Most widely available crocus present few challenges in cultivation, providing soil is well drained. In the open garden a sunny position is best for most, somewhere plants can be allowed to grow undisturbed without too much competition, such as in a sunny rock or gravel garden. Many come from areas that are dry in summer (when plants are dormant), often on limestone formations. To grow them in areas where soil is poorly drained it is best to build a raised bed – it need be only 10–15cm (4–6in) above the surrounding soil – and fill with a freely draining mix. At Wisley corms were planted in a medium consisting of two parts John Innes No.3, one part leafmould and one part grit, together with some high-potash fertiliser, a dusting of magnesian limestone and a vine-weevil insecticide. A few species such as *Crocus gargaricus* come from damper conditions, in meadow and alpine environments where soil tends to be acid to neutral. These were grown with more leafmould: one part John Innes No.3, two parts leafmould and one part grit; the limestone dust was omitted. In the open garden they grow well at the sunny margins of woodland borders, tolerating more moisture.

CROCUS TROUBLES

Apart from aphids, birds and mice – which love crocus so much that a former Wisley superintendent baited traps with *C. tommasinianus* corms – there are more serious problems. After flowering, several in the trial developed browning leaf tips, indicating root problems. Pathologists identified three soil-borne pathogens as the cause. Viruses can also strike, resulting in spotted, streaked or malformed flowers.

