Crocus speciosus

- Size: flowers to 12cm (3in), sometimes more.
- Site: lawns, rock gardens, autumn borders.
- Hardiness: H4 (−10 to −5°C/14 to 23°F).
- Flowering: October and November.
- AGM

This crocus is often confused with closely related saffron (Crocus sativus; see p44). It is variable and native to parts of Greece with scented flowers in pale mauve or stronger lilac and darker veins (inset, right) or, often, in cultivation, pure white. A distinguishing feature is the large, branched orange style, longer than the yellow anthers. Flowers are on shorter perianth tubes than the larger blooms of C. speciosus. Leaves appear with the flowers. Grow in a sunny, well-drained spot away from excess summer moisture — perhaps with other autumn flowers such as Aciς autumnallis (autumn snowflake). Alternatively, keep in pots of gritty, soil-based compost and, after leaves yellow in spring, put in a cold frame until September when growth resumes after watering.

Flowering: October and November.

Autumn crocuses

As with edible Crocus sativus (saffron), some beautiful, garden-worthy crocuses will come into flower with the fiery foliage, sparkling dew and glowing fruit of autumn. Following a recent RHS Plant Trial, here are five of the best

**Vigorous Crocus speciosus ‘Conqueror’ has large, lavender-blue flowers.**

**C. cartwrightianus**

- Size: to around 8cm (3in), sometimes more.
- Site: sunny, well-drained, dry in summer.
- Hardiness: H4 (−10 to −5°C/14 to 23°F).
- Flowering: October and November.
- AGM

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**RHS Plant Trial**

A two-year RHS Plant Trial of autumn crocus (2012–2014) took place at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey. In all, 49 entries were included and judged by the Rock Garden Plant Trials Assessment Forum. After the trial, those species and selections with existing AGM had their awards reconfirmed, but no new AGMs were given.

**C. goulmyi**

- Size: to 10cm (4in), sometimes more.
- Site: sunny, semi-shaded border or, ideally, naturalised in grass.
- Hardiness: H4 (−10 to −5°C/14 to 23°F).
- Flowering: October to November.
- AGM

Of more slender appearance than C. speciosus, this charming species is native to parts of Greece, specifically the Peloponneso where it is seen in old olive groves. It produces lightly scented, lilac-mauve flowers, each bloom paler in the centre. At the same time as flower buds develop fine grassy leaves appear. As its origins suggest, this species is a sun-lover needing Mediterranean conditions to thrive — one requirement is a more-or-less dry summer. Plants at the base of a sunny wall in well-drained soil in milder areas it may do well, otherwise keep in a pan of gritty, soil-based compost. With paler flowers it is C. goulmyi subsp. leucanthus. Desirable and beautiful pure white-flowered selection ‘Mani White’ (inset) is also well worth obtaining.

**C. pulchellus**

- Size: to 10cm (4in).
- Site: sunny or semi-shaded border or, ideally, naturalised in grass.
- Hardiness: H4 (−10 to −5°C/14 to 23°F).
- Flowering: Oct/Nov.
- AGM

One of the most beautiful of all the autumn-flowering species, lovely C. pulchellus is distinctive for its goblet-shaped flowers. These appear atop tall, slender golden perianth tubes, the yellow colour visible in the throat of the flowers from above. It is native to parts of Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece, among other areas. The petals are usually pale lavender in colour (inset), while in some hybrids, such as large-flowered ‘Zephyr’, they verge on softest grey-blue. Leaves appear after flowering. It makes a good species for growing in the garden, the flowers, although tall, are reasonably sturdy and will stand up well to autumn weather. Grow it in borders or in turf where it will spread well via seed or through the production of young corms.

**C. longiflorus**

- Size: around 8cm (3in), sometimes more.
- Site: sunny, well-drained border.
- Hardiness: H4 (−10 to −5°C/14 to 23°F).
- Flowering: October.
- AGM

Native to southern Italy, Sicily and Malta, this species is a good choice for growing outdoors in the UK as it will stand summer moisture better than many other autumn-flowering species. The slender leaves emerge at the same time as the deliciously perfumed flowers, which are tall, slender and particularly elegant in bud. They open soft violet, often with darker veins toward the base of each petal, and appear atop yellowish perianth tubes. The short style in the centre of each flower is red.

I have found this species to grow well in a sunny gravel garden with sharp drainage where the showy flowers freely attract bees late in the season.

More from the RHS

Plants with autumn interest will be on display and sale at the RHS London Shades of Autumn Show (28–29 Oct). For more information, see Update, p7 or visit www.rhs.org.uk/londonshows

Sign in to MyRHS to discover more autumn-flowering crocuses and colchicums.

**SUPPLIERS**

All species and most of the selections of autumn crocus mentioned in this article are listed by suppliers in RHS Plant Finder 2016, including:

- Aven Bulbs, Somerset; 01460 242177; www.avenbulbs.co.uk
- Kevoid Garden Plants, Midlothian; 0131 454 0660; www.kevoidgardens.co.uk
- Cotswold Garden Flowers, Worcestershire; 01905 422829; www.cgfl.net
- RV Roger, North Yorkshire; 01751 472226; www.rvgor.co.uk

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