

RYE DRIFTWOOD GARDEN CLUB

Topic: Sativus Crocus

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Saffron is a delicious & colorful seasoning used in many dishes throughout the world. Spanish paella and Indian curry are just two examples. The bright red-orange threads you buy are actually the stigmas, or female portion, of the Saffron Crocus. It takes thousands of flowers to produce a commercially useful amount, which is why it is so expensive. However, for the home gardener about two dozen plants should be enough for a few memorable dishes. Each successive year, the corms (which look like bulbs) will multiply, the size of the planting will increase and more stigmas can be harvested. Every 4-6 years the corms should be divided and replanted (right after the foliage has faded in the Fall). Division prevents overcrowding which can lead to decreased flowering/harvesting.

Planting Saffron Crocus Corms: In our zone 6 the corms should be planted as soon as you receive them usually the beginning of September. They do best in full sun and well drained soil that is moderately rich in organic matter. The site should be relatively dry in summer, when the corms are dormant.

Plant 4" deep and 4" apart. If gophers, mice, or voles are a problem plant them in containers or line the bed with wire mesh. Flowers usually come up 6 weeks after planting although occasionally they wait until the 2nd Fall to appear. Bloom lasts about 3 weeks. The grass-like leaves may emerge either with the flowers or soon after they appear. Sometimes the leaves wait until the following Spring. In either case the leaves persist for 8-12 weeks, then wither and vanish leaving no trace of the corms below until the flowers and leaves appear in the Fall. You probably want to mark the area where the corms are planted so you don't inadvertently dig them up while planting something else.

Overwintering Corms in Cold Climates: Saffron Crocus in colder winters than our Zone 6 must be brought indoors for the Winter. After the first few frosts but before the ground has frozen solid dig the corms up and place in a wooden crate or plastic tub. Completely cover with dry peat moss or sand and store in a cool dry space (40-50 degrees) such as a basement. Plant them in Spring after all danger of frost has passed, but do not water until you see new growth in early Autumn.

Another way to grow the crocus in cold-winter areas is to plant them 2" deep in clay or plastic pots filled with a well-drained soil mix and set the pots directly in the ground with the rims about 2 inches below the soil surface so the pots don't show. After they die back in the Fall, move them into the basement and store them dry for the Winter. Set pots out the following Spring again... mark the spot.

Harvesting and Using Saffron: Three stigmas are borne in the center of each purple bloom. The best time to harvest the stigmas is mid-morning on a sunny day when the flowers have fully opened and are still fresh. Pluck the stigmas from the flowers with your fingers then dry them in a warm place to preserve them for cooking. Store in a closed glass container. To use saffron steep the threads in hot liquid (water, broth, or milk, depending on the recipe) for about 20 minutes. Add both the threads and the steeping liquid early in the cooking or baking process and thread will continue to release color and flavor.