

GROW YOUR OWN SAFFRON

By Wallace P. Howell, WSU Benton-Franklin County Master Gardener. Revised October 1996

Saffron spice is obtained from the saffron crocus (*Crocus sativus*), a large, lavender, fall-blooming crocus, with three brilliant red stigmas. In the Tri-Cities, *C. sativus* blooms about mid-October. The stigmas need to be plucked from the blooms while they are still fresh. The most convenient way to pick them is with tweezers. After they have been picked, they should be thoroughly air-dried, and stored in a tight spice bottle or vial until used.

Saffron has been used since ancient times, both as a dye, and to flavor food. It lends a unique color and flavor to many foods prepared in countries around the Mediterranean Sea. Saffron was introduced into Spain by the Moors, who came from North Africa, and conquered most of the Iberian Peninsula, when the Roman Empire began to disintegrate. They stayed about 800 years, until driven out by the soldiers of Isabella of Castile, yes, the same Isabella who financed Christopher Columbus' voyages of discovery to the Western Hemisphere. The Moors made many contributions to the cuisine of Spain, but I think the tastiest one was the introduction of saffron, which is used in Spanish national foods, such as Paella and Arroz con Pollo.

Saffron is very easy to grow, yet it is often called, "the most expensive spice in the World". The expense comes in the harvesting of the stigmas, which is indeed, a rather laborious task. Nevertheless, if one loves saffron-flavored food, as I do, the time spent in harvesting the stigmas is well worth it. The stigmas from about 12 blooms are needed for one family-sized batch of Paella or Arroz con Pollo. So, if one wants to eat such food fairly frequently, throughout the year, he must have a relatively large number of *C. sativus* bulbs, or be willing to spend a considerable sum of money for the prepared spice.

I started with 12 bulbs about 15 years ago. The bulbs multiply fairly rapidly, and should be dug and separated about every three or four years. I find that 150 to 200 bulbs keep my family well-supplied with

saffron, and have made a practice of giving the extras away to other gardeners, in batches of 40 or 50 bulbs. I dug my saffron bulbs this past summer after five years in the ground, and found about 1,000. All except 150 were given away, and those 150 were immediately replanted. The bulbs should be planted about two inches deep, like other crocus. They are quite hardy, and will go through winter temperatures down to -15°F, or so, without injury. This type of crocus does not like to be in continuously wet ground. In fact, the bulbs will rot if planted in a swampy place, or in a garden where the ground has standing water. I water mine occasionally during hot weather (about every two weeks). Otherwise, they thrive on our annual precipitation of six or seven inches per year.

The annual growth cycle of *C. sativa* starts with a number of typical crocus leaves popping out of the ground in late winter or early spring, but they are not accompanied by flowers. The leaves continue to grow until hot weather comes, and may be eight or ten inches in length by then. The hot weather causes the bulbs to become dormant, and the leaves dry up and wither away. When cool weather comes, usually about the end of September, another crop of leaves appear, followed shortly by beautiful lavender blooms, two and one-half to three inches in diameter. The stigmas should be harvested then. Each bloom will fade and dry up within about one week, and when frosty weather comes, the blooms will cease. However, the leaves will remain, and if the winter weather is not severe, will stay on through the next spring, and early summer. If the winter weather becomes really cold, the leaves will wither and disappear, returning in the spring. The bulbs are dug, separated, and replanted in the summer, late July or early August. I usually have some bulbs to give away during the summer, in the years that I dig them.

For those readers who would like to try some Spanish food, recipes for Paella and Arroz con Pollo are attached.

Paella

1 1-lb. pkg chicken drumsticks
1 1-lb. pkg chicken thighs
¼ cup olive oil
½ tsp. oregano
¼ tsp. black pepper
½ tsp. salt
½ cup chopped onion
½ cup chopped green pepper
1 4-oz. jar pimiento, cut into narrow strips
(or ⅓ cup sweet red pepper strips)
1 clove garlic, minced
2 cups long-grain white rice, uncooked
1 1-lb. 4-oz can tomatoes
(or 1-lb. chopped fresh tomatoes)
1 8-oz. can clam broth
1 16-oz. can chicken broth
4-oz piece of chorizo sausage, thinly sliced
(or pepperoni, which has less fat, but not as authentic)
1 lb. shelled jumbo shrimp
1 10-oz. pkg. frozen peas
1 large pinch saffron (about ¼ tsp.)

Season chicken pieces with oregano, pepper and salt. Heat olive oil in a large pan with a cover. Brown chicken pieces all over, remove and set aside. Pour off all but two tablespoons oil in pan. Add onion, green pepper, garlic and pimiento. Cook until soft, but not browned. Add rice, and stir to coat evenly with oil. Add tomatoes, clam broth, chicken broth, browned chicken, sliced sausage, and saffron. Bring to a boil. Cover, lower heat, and cook approximately 15 minutes.

In the meantime, devein the shrimp, and simmer in slightly salted water for 10 to 12 minutes. Defrost the frozen peas. Add shrimp and peas to the large cooking pan, and continue cooking until peas are tender (about 10 minutes). Makes 10 to 12 servings.

Arroz con Pollo

(rice with chicken)

2 ½ lbs. chicken pieces
1 tablespoon flour
½ tsp. salt
½ medium onion, sliced
¼ cup olive oil
¼ lb. lean ham, diced
1 bunch scallion, chopped
1 4-oz. jar pimiento, diced
1 tablespoon minced parsley
1 bay leaf
1 cup long-grain white rice
2 ½ cups chicken broth
1 pinch of saffron (about 1/8 tsp.)

Dust chicken pieces with flour and salt, and cook in hot olive oil, in a large skillet, until well-browned and tender. Add slices of onion to prevent spattering. When tender, remove chicken to a large casserole, and place in a warm oven. Add ham, scallions, pimiento, and parsley to the skillet, and cook until scallions are tender. Add bay leaf, rice, and boiling hot chicken broth. Salt to taste, and bring to boil. Maintain a low boil, uncovered, for 10 minutes. Stir well, and check rice for texture. When rice is done, transfer to the casserole, arranging cooked chicken over the top. Place casserole in 325°F. oven, uncovered, for 20 minutes. Makes 6 to 8 servings.

For further adventures in foods flavored with saffron, excellent recipes may be found in cookbooks of France, Italy, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, India, and Pakistan.