

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: Dec. 25, 2005
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Fall color in the garden lifts our spirit and gives hope that winter really won't come so soon. When this color comes from a beautiful deep lavender crocus, the first reaction is that Mother Nature made a mistake and went right to spring, completely forgetting winter.

Not only is the color spectacular, but *Crocus sativus* has a gift for you in their three, long, scarlet stigmas (the pollen-receptive portions of the female pistils). This gift is saffron, the most expensive spice on earth.

You plant the saffron Crocus where you plant your spring flowering bulbs in a rich, well-drained spot with full sun. They should be planted 4 to 6 inches deep and about six inches apart. Feed with bulb food upon planting and just after the flowers finish. The leaves grow up to 18 inches and remain green all winter. This is truly a gift that keeps giving. As you would with your other bulbs, *C. sativus* should be dug up, divided, and replanted every year or so.

While *C. sativus* likes very hot summers, it seems to do well in our Northwest gardens where it can bloom into November. Since these bulbs are planted in the spring (the opposite of your spring flowering bulbs that are planted in the fall), they are available through the mail or at garden centers then. While it takes approximately 150,000 flowers to create 1 pound of dried saffron, 100 bulbs is a very good start. Saffron flavor is very intense and is usually used in minute (a pinch) amounts.

But what about harvesting the saffron? This is a job for the motivated chef/gardener who loves picky but easy jobs. When your bulbs bloom, pluck out the three scarlet stigmas in each flower. Place these stigmas spaced out on a paper towel and air dry for a day or so. When the saffron threads are totally dry, place them in a spice bottle and store in a dark place.

Saffron is traditionally used to flavor risotto, fish soup (bouillabaisse), and paella. A less traditional use is to flavor a crème anglaise sauce and serve with a chocolate dessert. The contrast of sweet chocolate with this unique, exotic spice is sublime. To get the most flavor out of your saffron, pulverize the threads between your thumb and index finger and soak that powder in a bit of hot water or milk before adding to the final dish. This method extracts the flavor and lovely orange color without cooking for too long.

Enjoy color and flavor all winter and renew your hope each time that spring really isn't too far away.

You can order *C. sativus* through the web at www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com, www.odysseybulbs.com, and www.mzbulb.com.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.