

For quick results

By R. W. Sidwell

The approach of the autumn bulb planting season is a reminder that some of these are actually autumn flowering and can produce their flowers within a week or two of planting. Indeed if stock is not sold quickly we may even see flowers appearing on bulbs displayed in the shops. There are two main groups of autumn flowering bulbs which are commonly offered for sale, colchicums and crocus.

We will start with colchicum. The native meadow saffron (*Colchicum autumnale*) is found in some local woodlands and at one time was not uncommon in pastures. It is very poisonous to herbivorous livestock and was the subject of a Board of Agriculture leaflet in 1909. Today colchicum poisoning of cattle is almost unheard of. Provided one does not try to make onion sauce out of the bulbs there is no danger to humans in handling and growing colchicums and the native species with its lilac pink flowers is an attractive plant to have in the garden. Because the flowers of these plants appear from bare ground without leaves, the name "naked ladies" has sometimes been applied to them. I do not know whether this sounds offensive, and if so is it to the plants or the ladies?

Many large flowered species and cultivars of colchicum are now on offer and there is a white form of the native one. *C. byzantinum* is a fine species, or possibly an early hybrid as it is sterile and does not set seed. This is the one most usually seen in shops and will flower by early September, often within a few days of planting. *C. speciosum* is even finer and flowers a little later. Flower colour varies from white and pale lilac to a fairly deep carmine purple.

A search through a good modern catalogue will show a range of hybrids, including double forms. One of the finest of the latter is one called "Water Lily" which is rather expensive — usually more than £1 per bulb.

All of the autumn flowering colchicums disappear from view after flowering and in the spring the not particularly attractive foliage emerges. It is important that this should be cared for, and not allowed to get smothered

with coarser plants, for next year's flowers depend on the leaves having reasonable access to light. By mid-summer the foliage will have died off and can be removed.

We will now turn to the other important group, the autumn flowering crocus. Although there is a slight superficial resemblance to colchicum, the two groups are quite distinct. The crocus is related to the iris whereas colchicums belong to the lily family.

Perhaps the finest of the autumn flowering crocus is the species *C. speciosus*. There are several named varieties of this species which are sometimes available. They are all in the colour range of pale lavender to mid-lavender blue. "Oxonian" is about the deepest colour one is likely to find but it is a long way from Oxford Blue. There is also a white variety which is very delicate and beautiful.

For many years catalogues have offered *C. zonatus* but the botanists now tell us that its correct name is *C. kotschyanus*. The more familiar name rolls off the tongue more easily than does the correct one and I think we will be using it for a long time to come. This species is characterised by an orange zone around the throat when the flower opens fully. This makes a pleasant contrast to the rosy lilac of the main body of the flower.

Most of these autumn crocus are taller and more slender than the commoner spring-flowering crocus, but there are some late autumn species, notably *C. niveus*, which are quite short. In fact the gap between the latest of the autumn species, which may be in bloom as late as November, and the earliest of the spring crocus, which may flower as early as the end of January, is not very great.

Both crocus and colchicums tolerate a fairly wide range of soils. On the whole, colchicums are more tolerant of shade and poor drainage. Crocus enjoy full sun and a summer baking. Both groups can be naturalised in grass. The crocus species ripen their foliage much earlier than colchicum and the grass can be mown in May.



Colchicum byzantinum