

Colchicum autumnale

[Synonyms : *Colchicum autumnale* var. *minor*]

MEADOW SAFFRON is a perennial. Native from Europe (including Britain) to North Africa, it has crocus-like, purple (very occasionally, white) flowers with six short stamens.

It is also known as Autumn crocus, Autumn grass, *Brândușă de toamnă* (Rumanian), *Cólchico* (Spanish), Colchicum, *Colchique* (French), *Cólquico* (Portuguese), Daggers, Fog crocus, Go-to-sleep-at-noon, *Herbst-Zeitlose* (German), *Herfsttilloos* (Dutch), *Hösttidlösa* (Swedish), *Jesienka obyčejná* (Slovak), Kite's legs, *Kolĉiko aŭtuna* (Esperanto), Meadow crocus, Michaelmas crocus, Naked Jacks, Naked boys, Naked ladies, Naked maidens, Naked men, Naked nannies, Naked virgins, *Nakna jungfrun* (Swedish), *Ocún jesenní* (Czech), Pop-ups, Purple crocus, *Safran des prés* (French), *Saffrwm y Gweunydd* (Welsh), Snake flower, Star-naked boys, Strip-Jack-naked, *Syysmyrkkyilija* (Finnish), *Tidlösa* (Swedish), Upstart, *Vanlig tidlösa* (Swedish), and *Zafferano bastardo* (Italian); and in flower language is said to be the symbol of 'my best days are past' and 'my happiest days are past'.

Meadow saffron is used in genetics in the breeding and development of new varieties of it.

Warning – all parts of the plant, whether fresh or dried, are poisonous (especially the corms and seeds) and should only be used by qualified practitioners. It can cause intense thirst, abdominal pain, pain in the limbs, diarrhoea, weak and quick pulse, muscular weakness, numbness in the throat, vomiting, purging, kidney failure, coma, convulsions and death from respiratory failure. The plant is poisonous for some animals (especially when young) but many mature animals are able to build up a resistance. The poison can be passed on in milk. In Britain meadow saffron is classified as a 'prescription only medicine'.

Meadow saffron is a protected plant in the Irish Republic under the Flora Protection Order 1987.

The appearance of meadow saffron can be confused with that of the edible, and unrelated, saffron (*Crocus sativus*). The latter's 'stamens' (stigmas) protrude from the flower, unlike those of meadow saffron. (Apparently the corms have also been confused with onion (*Allium cepa*).)

Autumnale means 'of Autumn' with reference to the time of flowering.

At one time meadow saffron was known as *filius ante patrem* which means 'the son before the father'. The Autumn flowers are followed by seeds in the ensuing Spring, but it used to be thought that as 'Spring', in the collective mind, precedes Autumn so with this plant the seeds appeared before the flowers.

Records show that at least from round about 1800 BC the ancient Egyptians knew of meadow saffron and according to the Greek philosopher, Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC), the plant was eaten by slaves to make themselves ill if, it is said, they felt they had been 'provoked or offended' – but they were believed to have kept a supply of antidote near to hand.

In Greek mythology Medea who was the daughter of Aeëtes, King of Colchis and was generally thought to have been a witch as well as a priestess of Hecate, is said to have given meadow saffron to Jason to restore his youth. Some drops of the liquid were spilt and meadow saffron sprang up from them.

The plant can be fatally poisonous and it is believed that the English 16th Century Elizabethans were under the impression that cow's milk could be an effective antidote for anyone who ingested too much of the plant.

Medicinally, herbalists who used the corm for treating respiratory ailments believed the plant's healing powers were at their highest when the corm was about the size of a chestnut. Although mentioned in all ancient and medieval herbal records (except Arabian) much of the medicinal qualities in the meadow saffron were only identified in the 18th Century. These findings led, in particular, to a treatment for acute gout (beyond that already long associated with meadow saffron in previous centuries) and for rheumatism, with the use of a drug called Colchicine extracted from the root – and this is still being prescribed at the turn of the 20th/21st Centuries. It also contains another chemical that can be used nowadays in treating some forms of leukaemia and skin cancers. The plant is also used today in homoeopathy.

It is the birthday flower for 3rd April.