

Crocus sativus

[Synonyms : *Crocus officinalis*, *Crocus officinalis* var. *sativus*, *Crocus sativus* var. *cashmirianus*]

SAFFRON is a bulbous perennial. Native to Asia Minor and southern Europe, it has crocus-like, blue, lilac or white flowers with protruding, orange-red, ‘stamen-like spikes’.

It is also known as *Açafrão* (Portuguese), Autumn crocus, *Azafrán* (Spanish), Blood of Thoth, *Carcom* (Hebrew), *Croco fiorito* (Italian), *Croco senza fiori* (Italian), *Echter Saffran* (German), *Echter Safran* (German), *Fan hong hua* (Chinese), *Fior cuculo* (Italian), *Fűszersáfrány* (Hungarian), *Grogo domestico* (Italian), Hay saffron, *Jafran* (Assamese, Bengali), *Kaashmirii keshara* (Nepalese), *Kashubha* (Tagalog), *Kesar* (Hindi, Punjabi), *Keshar* (Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi), *Keshara* (Nepalese, Sanskrit), *Khungumapu* (Tamil), *Komar-romar* (Malay), *Kong* (Kashmiri), *Krookus* (Estonian), *Krûkû* (Arabic), *Kuma-kuma* (Malay), *Kung kum* (Nepalese), *Kungumapu* (Tamil), *Kunkumapuva* (Telugu), *Kunyit kering* (Malay), *Kurkum* (Arabic), *Maustesahrami* (Finnish), *Nghe* (Vietnamese), *Romiet* (Khmer), *Saffraan* (Dutch), *Saffraankrokus* (Dutch), *Saffran* (Danish, German, Swedish), Saffron crocus, *Saffryr Meddygol* (Welsh), *Safran* (French, German, Norwegian, Romanian, Turkish), *Šafran* (Slovak), *Safran cultivé* (French), *Safran-Krokus* (German), *Safrankrookus* (Estonian), *Safrano* (Esperanto), *Šafrán setý* (Czech), *Safuran* (Japanese), *Sahafaran* (Arabic), *Sahrami* (Finnish), St. Valentine’s rose, *Sapran* (Malay), *Schafran* (Russian), *Shafran* (Russian), Spanish saffron, *Szafran* (Polish), *Szafran uprawny* (Polish), *Ya faran* (Thai), *Zaafaran* (Persian), *Za’farân* (Arabic), *Zafarani* (Swahili), *Zafferano* (Italian), *Zafferano vero* (Italian), *Zaffran* (Hindi, Urdu), *Zaforá* (Greek), *Zafraan* (Hindi), *Zafran* (Persian, Turkish), and *Zang hong hua* (Chinese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of ‘beware of excess’, ‘beware of success’, and mirth (flower).

The powder is collected from the ‘stamen-like spikes’ in the Autumn. Saffron’s growth and harvesting is as laborious an activity today as in centuries gone by. It takes about 50,000-75,000 flowers, picked by hand, to produce 1 lb. of spice. The spice itself is obtained from each flower’s 3 stigmas (the ends of the female organ which are pollinated) that have to be handpicked as soon as the flower opens. When these are dried their appearance becomes brownish and thread-like. The powder can often be adulterated or confused easily with cheaper substances, particularly ground turmeric (*Curcuma longa*).

Saffron’s appearance can be confused with the poisonous meadow saffron (*Colchicum autumnale*). The latter’s ‘stamens’ (stigmas) do not protrude like those of saffron.

Sativus means ‘cultivated’.

The common name Saffron comes from an Arabian word for ‘yellow’ *assfar* and *Crocus* is derived from the Greek *krokos* meaning a ‘thread’ (which refers to the long ‘stamen-like’ central spikes on the flower (the stigmas) from which the spice is obtained).

There has long been trade in this most expensive of spices which is used medicinally, for culinary purposes, as a dye and an ingredient in perfume. Often today as in the past turmeric, *Curcuma longa* (or even pot marigold petals, *Calendula officinalis* or safflower, *Carthamus tinctorius*) will be used as a less expensive alternative, especially in cooking.

Although many authorities seem to disagree, there are those who believe that saffron was cultivated in ancient Egypt and was not only used in medicine, but also to perfume the olive oil they applied to their skin to keep it supple. The flower can be seen in Cretan murals at Knossos that date back to 1600 BC and depict the Minoan saffron gatherer. In India, following the death of Buddha (c.563-c.483 BC), Buddhists adopted it as the sacred colour used particularly for caste markings and for dyeing cloth for their ceremonial robes. Today although the former are now dyed with the less expensive turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), saffron is still used for the caste markings of the wealthy.

It was familiar in the Middle East. In Mesopotamia, where it acquired a reputation as an aphrodisiac, saffron provided a dye as well as a culinary and medicinal ingredient. Also in the past, further north in what is now Lebanon, bride's veils were dyed with saffron. And of course saffron was one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

Although the ancient Greeks used saffron to produce a vivid yellow 'royal' dye colour (until this was associated with the cultured prostitutes who were known as *hetaerae*), it is rarely chosen for this purpose today as the dye is water-soluble. Greek legend can vary and some authorities tell a story of how saffron began. In this Hermes, the son of Zeus and messenger to the gods, transforms the blood from the fatal accidental wound he has given his friend, Crocos, into saffron flowers and Zeus subsequently has a bed made from saffron as befits, according to Homer (8th Century BC), 'the father of gods and men'.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the expense of the spice, very rich Romans used it to perfume themselves, their streets, their homes, public buildings, theatres and baths. It was fashionable in Rome not only to sprinkle it on the marriage bed of newly weds but also to scatter it over couches laid out for important guests at banquets. However when colour was the only consideration it is understood that safflower (*Carthamus tinctorius*) was sometimes used instead. Saffron was also an ingredient in various dishes as witnessed by the 1st Century Roman gourmet, Marcus Gavius Apicius. For instance he is believed to have included it in a sauce to be eaten with wild boar.

With the illumination of manuscripts a preserve of the monasteries saffron acquired a new role. It was not only mixed with egg white to produce a transparent golden yellow colour but was also added to green shades to enhance that colour as well. In early Christian times saffron provided a hair dye for Italian ladies. They used to admire the fair hair of the northern European races and brought the wrath of the early Christian Church on their heads when they tried to emulate this by dyeing their hair with this spice.

Saffron's popularity then suffered a decline in Europe until about the 9th Century when records show that it was being cultivated in Spain where it had been introduced by the Arabs. This enabled the Spanish to supply saffron to a large part of western Europe, particularly France and Germany, until the 16th Century (some historians believe it was two centuries earlier) when France began to grow it herself in the Toulouse area. (This last development was no doubt the one that broke the camel's back as countries in northern Europe had by then long obtained saffron through other sources such as the Venetian Office of Saffron set up at the time of the Crusades – or from the Middle East direct.) Much to the eventual dismay of both the Italian and Portuguese traders, Spain had to find alternative outlets for her saffron, and she began to exchange it in the Middle East for other spices such as ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) and cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*), which had to that point been the exclusive market in Europe of some of her trading neighbours.

For Spanish cooking saffron was to provide the colouring and flavouring which is still familiar today, particularly for the emerging Spanish national dish, *paella*. In France at Christmas and Easter it became the practice of Provençal bakers to present their best customers with saffron bread – and the spice was also set to become a traditional ingredient in the French *bouillabaisse*. For Italy during the Middle Ages roast meats ‘displayed’ at banquets were gilded with the saffron (if not gold leaf itself) and in due time it was to become especially associated with Milanese risotto. The spice’s popularity had reached Germany by the 12th Century and England by the 14th Century, and in the latter Country for instance it was to be an ingredient in the now traditional Cornish cake. (This Cornish cake was once accompanied however with some caution as Cornish fishermen used to believe that its presence on board would bring bad luck and no catch on that trip.) This tendency to, what would be considered by many today, vulgar and profligate display is said to have decreased by the 18th Century, particularly in France, as saffron became more accessible (although still relatively expensive).

The 14th-18th Centuries saw saffron’s more widespread use in Europe as a whole as a colouring agent and spice in cookery, as a perfume and in the treatment of women’s disorders. Its social importance in Europe remained high (although no longer exclusive), partly due to the unavoidably expensive harvesting methods. During this period its significance is well illustrated in England, for example, by the fact that spice dealers were called ‘saffron grocers’. Today saffron is still the most expensive spice but it is used with far greater discrimination.

Pharmaceutical records indicate that saffron was familiar in a medicinal capacity in England in 10th Century. In the 16th Century the plant was being grown in quantity in Saffron Walden in Essex (a state of affairs which continued until alternative cheaper synthetic substances became widely available) – and this led to the naming of the town. One legend tells how two centuries earlier, during the reign of Edward II (1284-1327), a pilgrim from the Chipping Walden area, as it was then known, made the journey to the Middle East and returned from Asia Minor with saffron corms hidden in his hollow stave. As smuggling these corms would have attracted a death sentence in the Land he had visited, it had been a very daring venture that fortunately ended without mishap as the corms were alleged to form the basis of a thriving local industry – so much so that some time during the 15th and 16th Centuries Chipping Walden became Saffron Walden. Saffron Walden prospered from the saffron trade and not only included the saffron flower in its coat of arms but also developed various customs. One of these was that during Elizabeth I’s reign (1558-1603) it became traditional to present the Queen with a silver cup of saffron powder when she visited the town. Apart from relatively prosaic uses it must have become fashionable for bedsheets to be dyed yellow with saffron during the first half of the 16th:Century as when Henry VIII (1491-1547) ruled the land, a law was passed forbidding households from so dyeing their sheets as it was thought to encourage less frequent laundering. In Ireland at one time it was believed that you could strengthen your limbs if you slept in saffron-dyed sheets.

By the end of the 16th Century 1 lb. of saffron was said to be worth 5 guineas. The value of saffron during this period is well illustrated by the dire penalties meted out to any who adulterated it. For instance in German Nuremberg it is said that Jobst Findeker was burnt to death in 1444 and twelve years later one Hans Kolbele was buried alive for similar dishonesty. The French Office of Safran also set similarly grim sentences at that time.

There seem to be widely conflicting views on saffron’s appearance in China and the first known reference to it in her records. Some authorities suggest that the Chinese initially came across saffron in the 13th Century when the Mongols, who used it extensively in their cooking, invaded China. Others say that China imported it from India and Persia in

the 14th Century during the Yuan dynasty. Yet others believe it was imported from Kashmir via Tibet. With regard to Chinese records, some historians claim that a Chinaman writing in the 3rd Century referred to Kashmir saffron – while other authorities believe that the first known Chinese written record of its use dates only from the last half of the 16th Century.

The Schwenkfelders who followed the Quaker-like teachings of the German reformer, Kaspar von Schwenkfeld (c.1490-1561), were one of the 40 families who emigrated from the Netherlands to Pennsylvania in the United States via England in 1734 in order to avoid religious persecution. They were familiar with saffron growing and took saffron recipes with them to their new home where, today, in their Pennsylvania Dutch community, home-grown saffron is still used and is an important ingredient in a traditional ‘Schwenkfelder’ cake.

Most saffron supplies in Europe today come from Spain (Valencia), the best of which are sold in threads. (This avoids the possibility of the confusion that can arise between the powdered form and other cheaper substances.) Its stems, dried, are used for colouring medicine. (Some food historians also note that saffron has been cultivated in Kashmir since at least the 3rd Century and that even today the quality of the harvest there rivals any other.)

Saffron has also invaded literature. In that of about the 16th and 17th Centuries the descriptive term ‘Cilician’ or ‘Corycean’ was apparently a traditional qualification applied to saffron by the English literati. It seems that this was based on information in the works of the famous Roman natural historian, Pliny the Elder (23-79), who associated saffron with Cilicia, a region in south-eastern Anatolia. Thus the poets such as Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599) penned the words

Saffron sought for in Cilician soyle

and his peer, William Browne (1591-1643), in *Britannia’s Pastorals*, wrote

Saffron confected in Cilicia

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the famous playwright, also included three or four references to saffron in his plays. In *The Comedy of Errors* Antipholus of Ephesus cries

..... are these your customers?

Did this companion with the saffron face

Revel and feast it at my house to-day,

and in *The Winter’s Tale* the Clown lists saffron among the ingredients needed for the sheep-shearing feast

.....I must have saffron, to colour the warden pies;

Saffron is used commercially in dentistry today to produce a painkiller.

Medicinally, saffron used once to be recommended by herbalists for the treatment of period problems and some ailments in children. It is rarely used in the West today, probably because there are alternative remedies that are less expensive. In India it has been used to treat stomach disorders, diabetes, liver enlargement, fevers, catarrh, depression and snake bites. In Chinese medicine however it is used for treating period problems, depression and shock.