

❖ Renee's Garden ❖

Saffron Growing Guide

Saffron is easily grown in the garden or containers. Unlike other crocuses that bloom in the spring, saffron crocuses are planted in early fall and bloom in the fall. They will flower even in cold weather and easily withstand light frosts.

Planting and Growing

Plant your fall blooming saffron crocus bulbs as soon as you receive them in a well-drained location in full sun. As Mediterranean natives, they like relatively dry conditions and soil that is moderately rich in organic material. If gophers, mice, or voles are a problem in your area, underwire the bed with wire screen or plant in containers.

In the garden, plant bulbs 3 to 4 inches deep and 4 inches apart, or 3 inches apart if planting in containers. Water upon planting, and again as needed when top 1 inch of soil is dry. Stop watering in late spring when foliage begins to yellow to let them go dormant. Saffron crocus can easily handle early fall frosts and will grow 4-6 inches tall with grassy foliage. Pretty striped violet blossoms will appear 5-8 weeks after planting the first season, blooming for about 3 weeks. The grass-like leaves may emerge with flowers or soon after they appear. Do not cut the leaves: they produce nutrients, enabling bulbs to grow larger each season.

After several months bulbs go dormant, leaving no traces above the ground until blossoms appear again in fall. Occasionally, flowers do not appear until the 2nd fall season. Be sure to mark the planting area,

so you don't inadvertently dig up the bulbs while they are in natural dormancy throughout spring and summer.

Your saffron crocus planting will increase in size and numbers every season. After 4-6 years, dig up and transplant to avoid crowding. Bulbs are reliably perennial in USDA zones 6-10.

Overwintering Bulbs in Cold Climates

In very cold winter areas, bulbs must be dug up and brought indoors for the winter. After the first frosts, but before ground has frozen solid, dig and store bulbs in containers deep enough to cover them completely with dry peat moss or sand. Store in a cool (40-45°F, 4-10°C), dry place, such as a basement. Plant them out in spring after all danger of frost has passed, but don't water until you see new growth in early autumn.

Another method is to plant the bulbs 2 inches deep in clay or plastic pots filled with a well-drained soil mix, putting the pots in the ground with their rims about 2 inches below the soil surface. Don't forget to mark their location so you don't dig in pots by mistake. After bulbs die back in late fall, bring pots

into your basement and store dry for the winter. Set pots of bulbs back out the following spring.

Harvesting

The precious saffron spice is made from the 3 fiery-hued stigmas borne in the center of each lily-shaped blossom. While it can take hundreds of blossoms to get a commercially useful amount, for home use, you will need the stigmas from the flowers of at least 10-12 bulbs for most recipes. As bulbs increase in size and number of blooms each season, your harvests of saffron stigmas will dramatically increase. The 2nd and 3rd year's yields are considered the best, as each bulb will yield up to 6 to 9 flowers or 18 to 27 stigmas.

Pluck only the brilliant red-orange stigmas from the center of each flower in midmorning when the crocus is fully opened up and still fresh. These saffron stigmas, which are conventionally called "threads" in most recipes, must be completely dried to preserve them for cooking. Using a paper plate or paper towel, place them in the sun or a warm, dry area. After drying, store them in an airtight jar.

Using Your Saffron

Steep the saffron threads in hot liquid – water, broth, or milk, depending on what the recipe requires – for about 15 minutes. Add steeping liquid with threads early in the cooking process and the threads will continue to release their wonderful color and flavor.

Saffron adds delicious flavor and golden color to breads, desserts, rice dishes and main courses from countries as varied as England, India, the Middle East, Scandinavia and throughout the Mediterranean. You'll find that saffron threads from your garden add exquisite flavor to your cooking; it is a true gardening pleasure to grow your own!

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