

Crocus

WaterWise bulbs

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Winter inevitably makes me think of spring, or at least the promise of spring, including *Crocus*. This is one of the first plants to bloom each year, and like most bulbs or bulb-like plants, is also WaterWise, thriving with little or no additional water to come back year after year.

Although there are about 80 species in the genus, the most popular are the Dutch crocus, cultivars of *Crocus vernus*. Crocus are members of the iris family (Did you guess Iridaceae before you read this?), are native to summer dry or mountainous regions of the world—parts of Europe and Asia. After blooming and setting seed, they spend their late summers and autumn safely dormant below ground.

The underground part is technically a corm, a swollen and compact underground stem. The grass-like leaves often have a white stripe running down the middle from base to tip. White, purple, yellow, lavender, even striped, these early bloomers can multiply to create lovely drifts of color, sometimes against the snow.

In Oregon, crocuses seem to be planted mostly in garden beds or borders or in pots. In other parts of the country, they are popular in rock gardens and in lawns. Perhaps in those parts of the country, the grass is slower to grow because mowing is not recommended until at least 4 weeks after blooming ends. With mulch, they can be grown in Zones 3 or 4, but in most of western Oregon, except for higher elevations, mulch is not required for survival.

One species, *Crocus sativus*, is the saffron crocus, native to southern Europe, is a source of spice—anthers of 7000 flowers are required to make 1 dry ounce. No wonder it is so expensive.

Most crocuses bloom in the spring, but the saffron crocus and a few others, bloom in the autumn.

They have few diseases, however, they are popular edibles by some of our small creatures like gophers and mice. If this is an issue, planting them in wire cages can help.

