

The Crocus Group - the early days

When David Stephens' letter arrived, suggesting that I might like to write a short history of the way in which the Crocus Group evolved, I viewed this with a mixture of enthusiasm (what a good idea) and trepidation (will I be able to remember?), so here it is and I apologise in advance for any serious omissions of facts or people. Before commencing I would like to thank Anne Blanco-White, Bill Killens and Ray Cobb for their comments, and David Stephens for his very apt description of the Group as a 'quirky and idiosyncratic organ' - a tradition, he notes, that he is proud to perpetuate. By way of explanation for this comment I must explain that the Crocus Group did, in a manner of speaking, 'come about' rather than bursting upon the world with a fanfare of publicity and has always managed to get along in a serendipitous sort of way to the extent that there is no constitution, no fee and no AGM (oh joy). But we have always been lucky in having that most essential person, a good honorary secretary.

However, let us return to The Beginning - which is in itself not easy to define. The British Iris Society has several Groups, mainly geographical - the Kent Group, Mercia Group, etc. - but one of these devotes its attentions to the wild irises and is known as the Species Group. My first encounter with this group of enthusiasts was in the 1960s when we met in the RHS New Hall (now Lawrence Hall) in the evening of the first day of the Westminster (then fortnightly) Shows. Usually the format was to have a talk about a particular group of Iris species, or the results of a plant hunting expedition. Once a year there was an auction and I am sure that anyone who witnessed one of these events will agree that they were remarkable - for the range of irises on sale, the prices paid and the generally boisterous behaviour of a group of normally well-controlled decent citizens; it is surprising what happens when a rare plant and money are brought together into the same room.

The precise steps that resulted in the following event taking place is not recorded but, on the 20th February 1968, the BIS Species Group "met for an experimental symposium on Crocus." Clearly those with interests outside the normal boundaries of the Group had joined forces and put forward such a proposal. It is on record that "Invitations were extended to enthusiasts and the result was a gratifyingly, if uncomfortable, Full House." The programme was introduced by Gerard Parker, a friend and neighbour of E. A. Bowles who appropriately told a few stories about EAB. Gerard Parker is no longer with us, but the other speakers are: the programme continued with a detailed talk on crocus cultivation by one Raymond Cobb, and another on the Turkish annulate crocuses by Brian Mathew. Both are still very much involved in the world of Crocus, and the latter is still in the land of the permanently perplexed on the subject of annulate crocuses. A very young Martyn Rix gave an account of the two spring-flowering Spanish species *C. nevadensis* and *C. carpetanus*. Attached to the report of this meeting was a note to say that there would be a meeting "for a further discussion on Crocus Species" on Tuesday 28th October 1969, so at this stage the fledgling Crocus subgroup of the BIS Species Group was a loose assemblage but with enough interest to suggest another gathering in the autumn of the following year. Anne Blanco-White has described it (in a letter) in horticultural terms as a sport of the Species Group which 'developed quietly and gradually acquired a distinctive appearance of its own until finally it was separated and left to grow on in its own right.' However, it is difficult to separate the activities involving Iris and Crocus as most of the people involved were interested in both, and the Crocus evenings were just one of the regular Species Group meetings, but devoted to Crocus - not a distinct club.

A Bulletin (headed No 1) of the Iris Species group for March 1969 reports on the winter (Iris) meeting of January 28th 1969 where it was noted that "everyone agreed, and forthwith put down, a charge of 1/- (=5p for the younger Members) per head per meeting to help defray the cost of hiring a room at the RHS Hall. A footnote on the same page indicates overwhelming support for a further meeting of crocologists: "At least two members had written, rather wistfully, to ask whether we intended to discuss Crocus again", and the response confirmed that there would be a meeting on October 28th 1969. Gatherings of this nature continued for the next 4 years, one evening meeting a year being set aside for Crocus and organised by the officers of the Species Group. Very interesting they were too, drawing in people from far and wide. The notes for the 1970 annual crocus meeting of the Species Group, as it was billed, started with a talk by Dr John Marr who had in his buttonhole a new species from northern Greece which "Mr C. D. Brickell of Wisley says he will be describing as a new species before too long." This duly took place, and the name *C. robertianus* appeared on the scene. The number of attendees was not noted down but there was a "good showing of both the usual faces [i.e. the regular Iris S.G. members] and Crocus enthusiasts from as far as Nottingham and Shropshire enjoyed a few hours exchanging views and notes on the genus." At this time, and for about 10 years, I was studying Crocus as part of my work in the Kew Herbarium, so it is not surprising that the annual Crocus meeting of the

Species Group often featured contributions from me. Unfortunately some of the comments were premature (the monograph was published in 1982) and reading through the reports now is sometimes an uncomfortable experience!

There was another Crocus symposium on March 13th 1973, where the speakers were myself, John Marr, Richard Brittain and Mr Wilkinson, but if one is trying to put a date on the actual start of the Crocus Group as a distinct entity it is the next year that is most significant. In the Iris Species Group bulletin for September 1974 is a note headed:

"Crocus Enthusiasts. Various members ...are particularly interested in crocuses and have asked to be put in touch with fellow addicts. Naturally no addict has volunteered to do anything about this. Your secretary [at this time, Prof. Marion Bowley - BM] cannot undertake it. However, if the addicts send their names to her before the end of October a list will be included in a subsequent bulletin".

The next bulletin, October 1974, contained a "Notice for Crocus Addicts: There is good news! In response to my note...Mrs Primrose Warburg has offered to be 'crocus secretary' to look after the interests of Crocus enthusiasts." A list was compiled and published in the November 1974 Species Group bulletin; it is worth repeating this as it constitutes probably the nearest we can get to a list of founder members of the Crocus Group and includes several people prominent in the crocus world who are no longer with us in body:

R. Bagnall, M. Baker, G.E. Barrett, R.F. Bills, Mrs M. Bing, Mrs A. Blanco White, Mrs P.L. Bradfer-Lawrence, Mr & Mrs H. Crook, V. Cross, Rear-Admiral P. & Mrs P. Furse, A. King, B. Mathew, Mrs E. Parker-Jervis, Mrs P. Warburg.

There are some names inexplicably absent from this list and one assumes that their absence was either due to an administrative oversight or the owners of those names were slow in putting them forward to the secretary. Ray Cobb and John Marr particularly come to mind.

Primrose had, of course, been involved with the Iris Species Group from its early days and was a great supporter of the plant auctions as a generous donor. Her interest in Crocus was more than just a personal hobby, for her husband E. F. ('Heff') Warburg (who died in 1966) was greatly interested in the genus and had published a botanical account in the journal 'Endeavour' in October 1957; one feels that, had he survived, he would probably have worked his research up into a monograph. The fact that Primrose had a considerable knowledge of Crocus made it particularly fortuitous that she had volunteered to take on the running of this amorphous body of enthusiasts, and continued to do so until 1996 when David Stephens took over the role.

I think it is true to say that everyone in the Group was fond of Primrose and her forthright manner, although in some cases I am certain it was tinged with a degree of cautious respect - fear is probably too strong a word. At one stage the editor of the bulletin noted a visit to Mrs Primrose Warlock's garden so maybe fear is the right word! It would also be overstating things to say that Primrose ruled over the Group with a rod of iron, but she was firm and there were never any doubts about her likes and dislikes. Ray Cobb, who recalls that he had corresponded with her husband, notes that "one did not join the Group, one was invited!" The organisation, if that is not being too laudatory, was, as I have said, a loose one so there was no subscription and no accounts; if funds ran low members were either asked for a donation or urged to bid generously at the crocus corm auction. I remember having a slight difference of opinion with Primrose as to when the auction should be held. I preferred early autumn while the corms were still dormant, she preferred spring when they were in full growth; her words on the matter were something to the effect that "I am not poking about in bare earth looking for them, you'll get them when I can see what I am doing." However, the auction did normally take place at the annual autumn meeting in the RHS Hall, in addition to having a speaker, so they were quite full evenings. These auctions did keep the Group afloat financially and we were seldom asked for a donation. In fact it was noted after an auction in 1980 that "judging by the prices paid for crocuses [the Crocus Group] must include the wealthiest members of the Species Group." From this comment it can be seen that in 1980 this quasi-autonomous body was still seen as part of the British Iris Society, and even as recently as 1991 it was the Iris Species Group Bulletin that billed the yearly gathering as 'The Annual Crocus Group Lecture, followed by the Annual Auction.' It is really only in the last five years or so that the Crocus Group has flown the nest and now publishes its own newsletter, has a very comprehensive seed list, and a committee - but no constitution or AGM! Another regular at both Iris and Crocus meetings, right from the beginning, was Anne Blanco White who usually provided a projector and was rewarded with a box of chocolates; this was the standard currency in the Crocus Group for speakers and those opening their gardens to fellow enthusiasts. The Group grew steadily: 14

on the list in 1974, 28 in 1975, but Ray Cobb recalls that Primrose preferred a small, select membership and became alarmed when it rose to the 50 mark. For this reason she tried to avoid any form of publicity or mass recruitment.

Garden visits started quite soon after the formation of the Group, usually taking place on Sundays. Crocuses are among the first plants in the year to flower, so it was the most enthusiastic members who turned up, wrapped up to the eyebrows and carrying their packed lunches. Most garden owners provided a warm room in which to dine, and often a very welcome hot drink or soup. Group members were invited to bring along Crocus corms for informal auctions, and any pots of Crocus as items of interest. Inevitably some visits were cancelled due to adverse conditions; that of the 8th February 1976, for instance, to Jenny Robinson's garden was abandoned due to snow. A month later a visit to Primrose's garden on a freezing day is indelibly etched on my mind as she grew nothing under glass - everything had to be absolutely hardy, including the visitors. Garden outings in the early years included the Crocus collections of Ray Cobb (Nottingham), Jenny Robinson (Suffolk), Dick David (Cambridge), Brian Mathew (Surrey), RHS Wisley and Chris Brickell's private garden, RBG Kew, John Marr (Surrey) and Elizabeth Parker-Jervis (Oxfordshire).

This, then, is part of the story of the early days - others may remember further details and anecdotes and I hope they will send them in to the Secretary for the newsletter. The more recent history should also be recorded and I look forward to a contribution that takes us on through the latter part of the 30+ year story of the Crocus Group.

Brian Mathew