



BULB LOG 51.....22nd December 2010



With heavy snow back again and a deep frost preventing any work outside I was wondering what to write in this week's Bulb Log. How delighted I was on Monday morning to receive a copy of Jānis Rukšāns, (JR) much anticipated new book on Crocus from Timber Press to review. I wasted no time in sitting down with book in hand- can it live up to the expectation?

CROCUSES

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO THE GENUS



JĀNIS RUKŠĀNS
Foreword by BRIAN MATHEW

My first reaction with any book is to flick through the pages to see the layout and illustrations. There is a clear layout here with good sized text making it easy to read and the paper is of a reasonable weight giving the book a good feel in the hands. All the colour pictures are grouped into two sections meaning that you have to flick back and forward to be able to compare the picture of a species with the text that you are reading. It may be a personal preference but in today's world where colour pictures and text can be so easily combined on a single page I wish that been done here. I understand that this is a Publishers' decision and it will have been taken to keep costs down but I wonder how much more it would put on the cover price – from my position it may be a cost worth paying.

Now on to the contents:-

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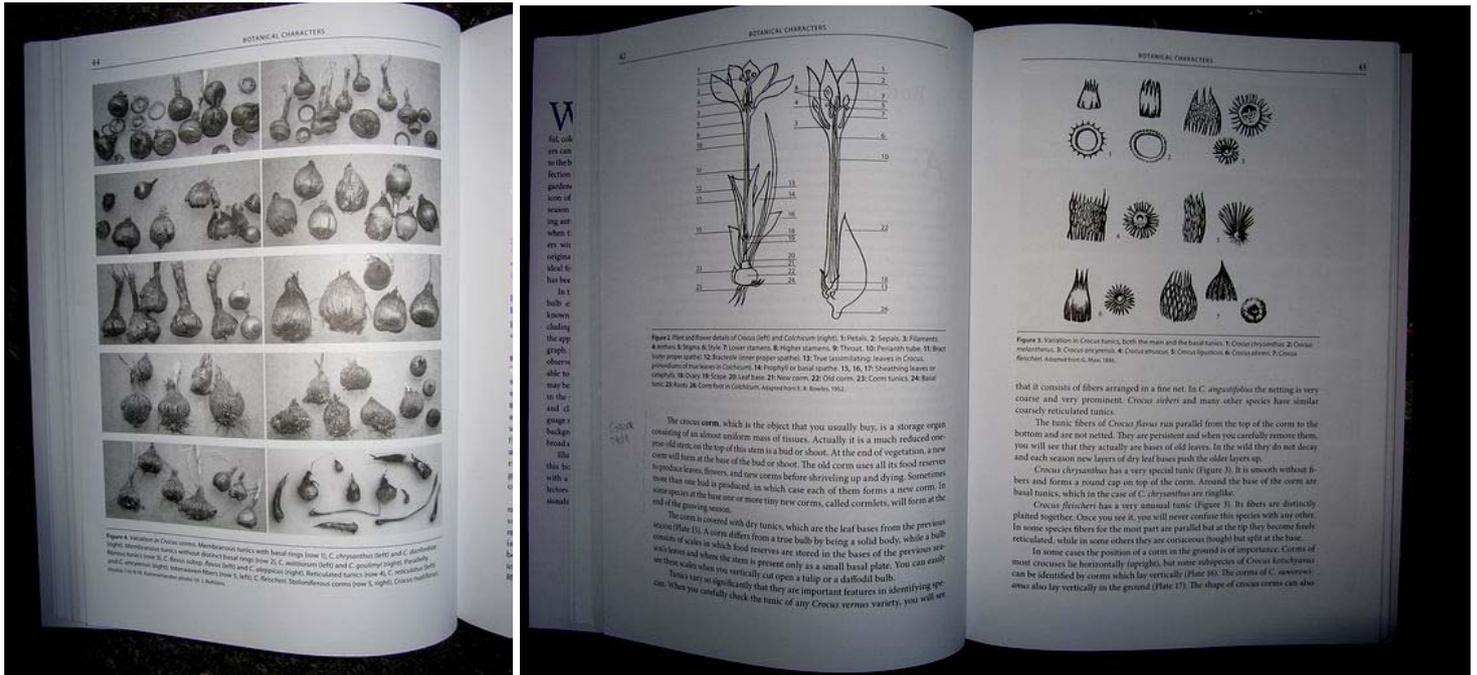
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Photographs follow pages 96 and 160.

The foreword is by no less a person than Brian Mathew(BM) whose own book 'The Crocus' published in 1982 has long been the classic reference for Crocus lovers with second hand copies much sought after. I think the most enlightening comment in his foreword is that BM does not always share the same view of the species and classification that Jānis Rukšāns has published here. However, BM goes on to say that, after consideration, any new work describing the many new discoveries since the 1980's could only add to the overall knowledge and enjoyment of this fabulous genus. I think it is a wonderfully honest statement that helps growers like me, with less botanical knowledge who often times struggle to identify or see the difference between the many species and subspecies, to understand that not even the experts always agree.

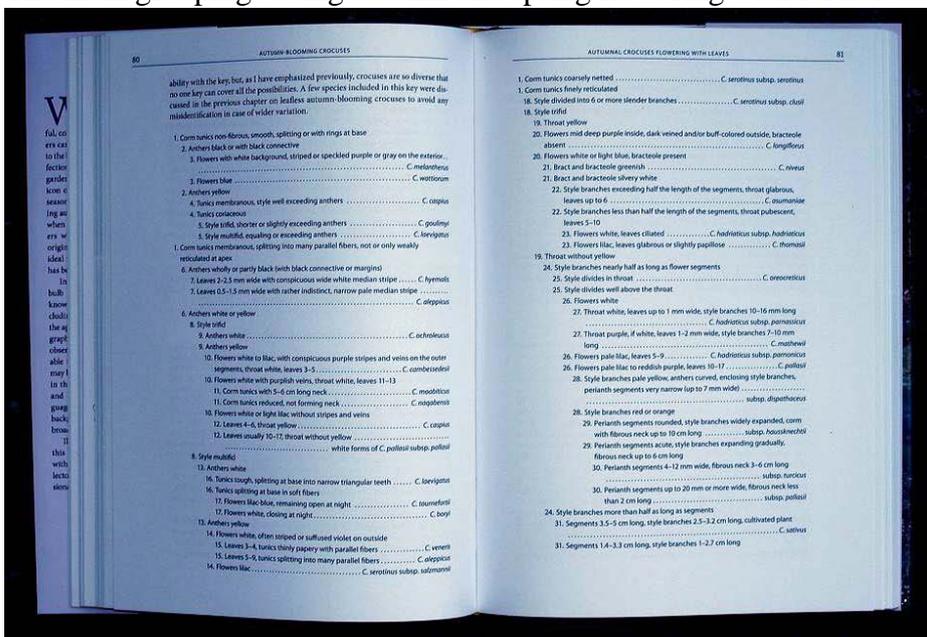
JR generously acknowledges the many sources of information that he has collated into this volume as well as his own vast experience. It is clear that there is so much variation in Crocus and so many species growing in a wide range of locations that no one person could ever study them all in the detail that they might like to. Combining this knowledge and experience from a number of experts, travellers and growers has allowed JR to give us valuable information on the majority of the genus described at the time he wrote his copy.

In the opening chapters JR outlines the basics of cultivating Crocus in the open garden as well as in pots. There is much detail here of how JR grows his Crocus in the challenging cold climate of Latvia and cultivation information from a number of other growers is also included. These chapters cover all the procedures that the Crocus grower needs to know including seed sowing, potting mixes, feeding regimes, lifting and dividing, etc. In some aspects I feel that JR could have given us more detail and information in these chapters but as he has explained earlier, his original manuscript had to be reduced by 20%, again due to printing costs and it is my suspicion that a lot of those cuts occurred in these opening chapters. I found the section on pests and diseases of particular interest - it is extensive covering a wide range from rodents to virus.



The chapters on 'Botanical Characters' is very clearly written and will give even those readers that come with no botanical knowledge and understanding of how the botanists separate the species and the main characteristics that they use to differentiate them. To add our understanding the different parts of the plant and the main parts used as diagnostics are illustrated with black and white drawings and pictures.

The main body of the book is devoted to the descriptions of the species which JR has split logically into groups. The main groupings being autumn and spring flowering with further sections on those that share similarities of



colour such as 'Yellow Fever', 'Reticulated Blues' or a geographical location, 'The Eastern Runners' and he starts each chapter with a key to aid identification.

JR admits that his keys have problems which he has done his best to overcome. Due to the time of year I have not been able to try the keys out for myself but I applaud JR for publishing them here. It is easy to criticise keys but very difficult to write them; he has even been brave enough to attempt a key for the unruly Biflorus conglomerate that tries so hard to defy categorisation.

The chapters of the species are very easy and enjoyable to read. The descriptions of each species do not contain all the fine botanical detail such as length of filaments etc that appears in Brain Mathew's book but as this is primarily a book for gardeners, most of whom would skip over those technical sections, it is not missed at all. JR does describe simply and clearly the main features that have been used to separate one species or subspecies from another and does occasionally give the measurements where he feels they are essential to allow us to identify the different forms. In the species chapters JR is also generous in sharing his extensive knowledge of the geography of the plants, their history and availability in cultivation as well as hints and tips of how and where to grow them in our gardens. JR regularly quotes from E.A. Bowles and his 1924 book on 'A Handbook of Crocus and Colchicum'. I think it is fair to say JA holds Bowles as a hero figure - I like many of you share this view and indeed have a very well-thumbed copy of the 1952 revised edition.



There are sixty four pages with three hundred and seven colour pictures illustrating the majority if not all of the species, subspecies and forms. Some are in cultivation and some are of the plants in the wild

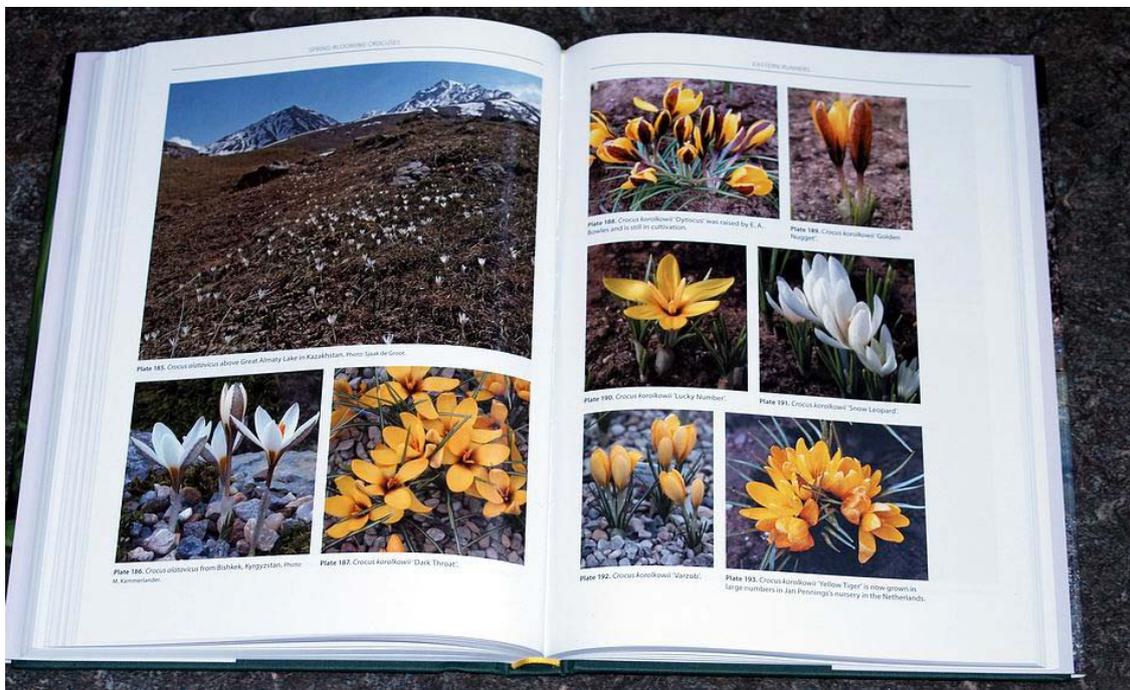


Plate 185. *Crocus albotinctus* above Great Arany Lake in Kazakhdan, photo: Isaac de Groot.



Plate 186. *Crocus albotinctus* from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, photo: M. Karamanov.



Plate 187. *Crocus karadagii* Dark Tiger.



Plate 188. *Crocus karadagii* 'Dynamite' was raised by E.A. Kozlov and is still in cultivation.



Plate 189. *Crocus karadagii* Golden Nugget.



Plate 190. *Crocus karadagii* 'Lucky Number'.



Plate 191. *Crocus karadagii* 'Snow Leopard'.



Plate 192. *Crocus karadagii* 'Vanzab'.



Plate 193. *Crocus karadagii* 'Yellow Tiger' is now grown in large numbers in Jan Penning's nursery in the Netherlands.



Plate 58. *Crocus hemminki* subsp. *hemminki* on Mount Hemminki at 1700 m, photo: Osmo Pentt.



Plate 59. *Crocus moabiticus*, photo: John Lonsdale.



Plate 59. Dark form of *Crocus moabiticus*, photo: Osmo Pentt.

Plate 57. Close-up of *Crocus hemminki* (SBL 119), photo: John Lonsdale.



Plate 60. *Crocus moabiticus* sometimes produces leaves and flowers at the same time, photo: Osmo Pentt.



Plate 61. *Crocus melantherus* in Peloponnesus near Mount Kiliki, photo: Yvan Le Geyt-James.



Plate 62. *Crocus melantherus* (PELO-028) in Peloponnesus.



Plate 81. *Crocus chionodoxa*.



Plate 82. *Crocus chionodoxa* var. *alba*.



Plate 83. *Crocus chionodoxa* var. *albiflorus*.



Plate 84. *Crocus maritimus* (PELO-016).



Plate 85. *Crocus chionodoxa* var. *albiflorus*.



Plate 86. *Crocus chionodoxa* var. *albiflorus*.



Plate 87. *Crocus chionodoxa* var. *albiflorus*.



Plate 88. *Crocus chionodoxa* var. *albiflorus*.



Plate 89. *Crocus chionodoxa* var. *albiflorus*.

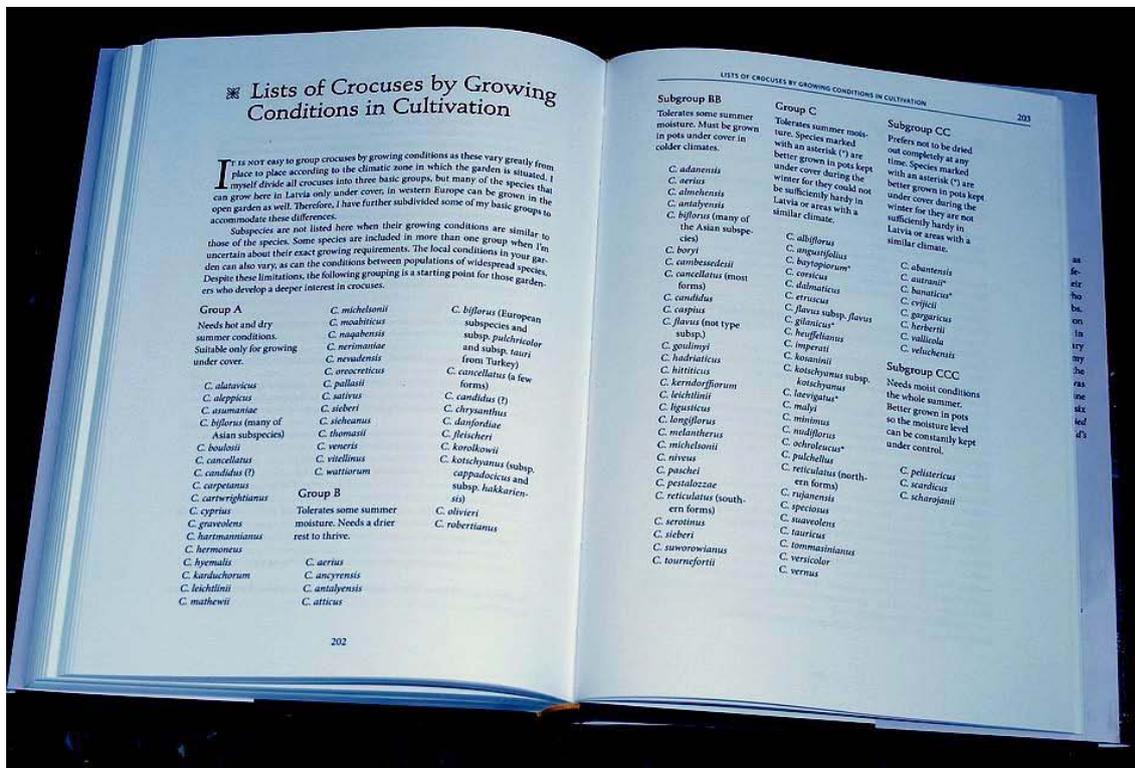


Plate 90. *Crocus chionodoxa*.

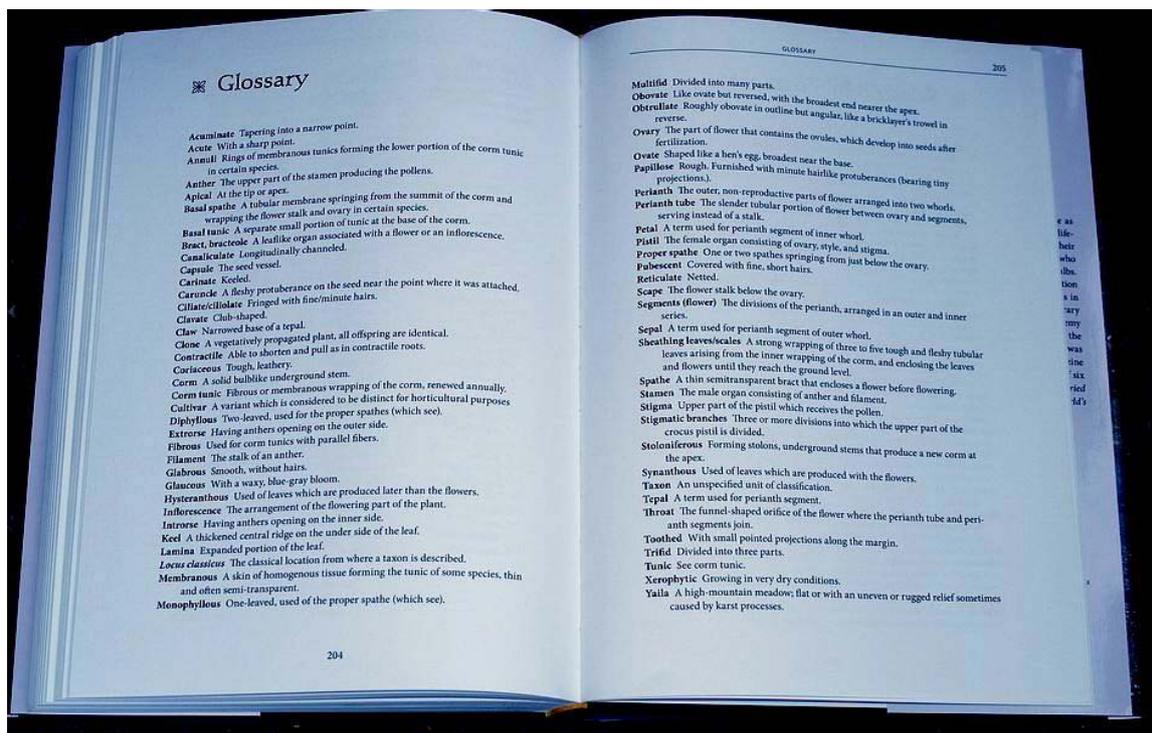


While the pictures do not sit beside the relevant text, as I would like to see them, they are grouped into sections to reflect the order that they appear in the text and there are clear links in the text of the illustration numbers making it relatively quick to flick back and forward between text and pictures.

A short but useful chapter discusses some new and little known species in an attempt by the author to make the book as up to date with recent discoveries as is possible. Likewise a chapter listing hybrids of both wild and garden origin currently known to him.



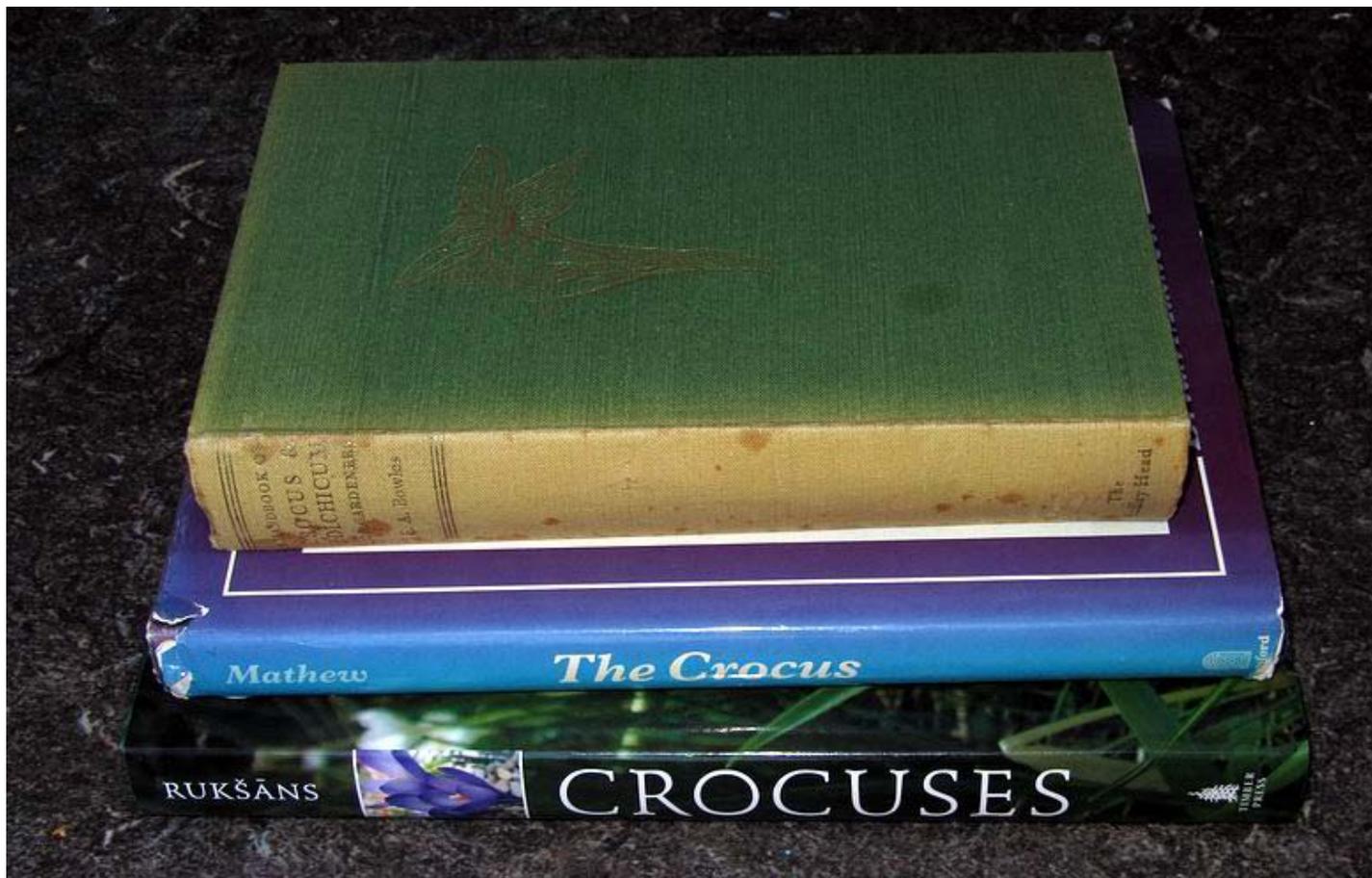
The final chapter lists all the species by growing conditions in cultivation. This is a most useful inclusion both for the experienced and new grower of Crocus as it gives you instantly the preferred basic conditions to try and establish the plants in our gardens. They are grouped under headings such as 'Needs a hot and dry summer, Needs summer moisture' etc. and I am sure this is worth the cover price of the book.



I always like a book that uses technical and botanical terms to have a glossary to explain those terms to readers not familiar with them and JR has compiled a two page list doing just that.

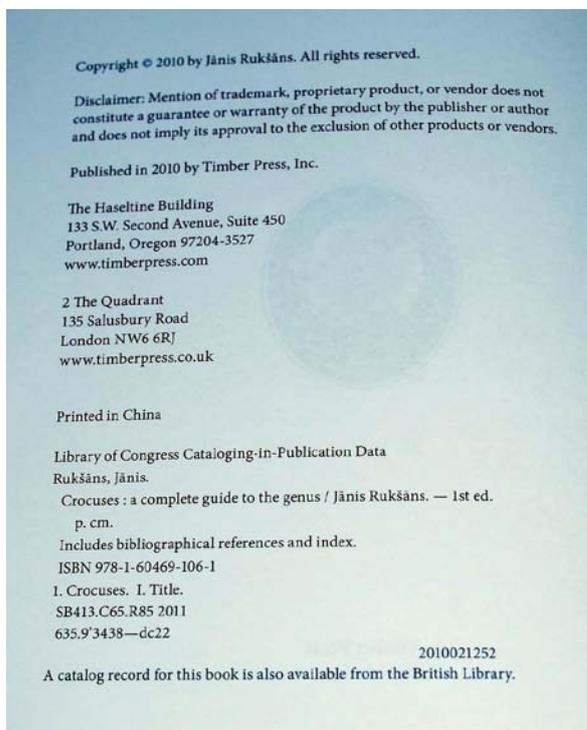
In conclusion I think this is an excellent book that will both satisfy the needs of those who are already 'Croconuts' as well as introducing many more gardeners who only know the genus Crocus from those commonly seen in garden centres to the wonderful world of Crocus.

Careful reading of this book will aid you in your selection of species and you too could have Crocus in flower for eleven out of twelve months. How does it compare to the two massive tomes from the past, 'The Hand Book of Crocus and Colchicums' by E A Bowles and 'The Crocus' by Brian Mathew?



I think this book sits very comfortably between these two great standards. In a sense it brings us up to date (at the time JR wrote) with the latest introductions and new names – all are described and illustrated in a highly readable and understandable way at the same time as giving us information on the history and geography of the plants and valuable tips on how to go about growing them in our gardens. There are not many books on a single genus that I would say made a good read – that is to say, I use many of them all the time for reference and would not be without them but I would not sit and read through the species chapters for pure pleasure - one exception to this would be JR's hero EA Bowles and his book on Crocus. I would now add this latest book on Crocus by Jānis Rukšāns to that list – I found it a very enjoyable as well as informative read.

Will it replace these other two books? No it will complement them and any one seriously interested in Crocus will want all three. For those just getting interested or those unable to find the other books I suggest you get your copy of 'Crocuses, A Complete Guide to the Genus' by Jānis Rukšāns before it sells out- it could be the only book on Crocus that you will ever need and it is bound to become very popular.



Due for release in January, I know that some pre-publication offers are available and if you search some of the well known online book sellers you will find it on offer at a considerably lower price than the cover price of £30.00.

Crocus by Jānis Rukšāns

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