

CROCUS IN YOUR GARDEN

By Shirley Froehlich, BSA

Most people know that the Prairie Crocus *Pulsatilla patens* is the provincial flower of Manitoba, however, many people have never seen it in the wild and do not realize that it can be grown in our gardens quite successfully. I have propagated and grown them in my gardens just north of Winnipeg for years with great results. Their furry buds poking out of the ground in April is a source of inspiration to me to keep up the work of propagating our prairie plants. And seeing the buds open to reveal their cozy yellow centres gives me energy to continue promoting them to fellow gardeners.

DESCRIPTION

For most people the name “Crocus” invokes visions of furry little mauve flowers popping out of the ground in early spring. They are usually only a few inches tall when they open their flowers to the warming rays of the sun. Since their flowers are so close to the ground they are also known by another name “The Ears of the Earth”. In the U.S. it is known as “Pasque Flower”.

It is often mistakenly thought to arise from a bulb like the imported Dutch Crocus bulbs we see in garden centres in fall. This is not the case as the plants are not related. It was likely given the same name because it blooms at the same time as the Dutch Crocus. Our Prairie Crocus belongs to the Crowfoot family while the imported Crocus bulbs belong to the Iris family. Prairie Crocus has a thick, woody taproot which makes it quite difficult to transplant from the wild, however, it is fairly easy to grow from seed.

When I show people my crocus plants in the garden after they are finished blooming everyone is surprised by their appearance. The furry flower stems elongate over a period of 4-6 weeks until they become a foot tall. The flowers become very attractive seed heads bearing a ball of many seeds, each seed having a long, feathery tail. The seed is held for about 4 weeks until it is ripe, sometime from late May to mid June. The finely divided leaves also make an appearance after the flowers fade. Since they lack the furriness of the flower stems they are often unrecognized. The leaves persist in an attractive clump all summer long. When working around the plants one fall I noticed that next years flower buds were already formed and sitting right at the soil surface ready to jump out of the ground at a moments notice in the spring.

NATIVE HABITAT

The Crocus can be found in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba as well as across the U.S. Great Plains. Alberta and Saskatchewan have drier climates than Manitoba so Crocus are more widespread there than in Manitoba. It grows on the open prairie and hillsides and in drier areas of the parklands. It is frequently found in gravelly or sandy type soils. In Manitoba some of the places they can be seen are the Brandon Hills, Portage and Carberry Sandhills, the Pembina Hills, Bird’s Hill Park, Sandilands and the Living Prairie Museum on Ness Avenue in Winnipeg. Every year the Living Prairie Museum hosts a “Crocus Weekend” around the end of April with special

programs and guided walks to celebrate spring's arrival. They also have a brochure giving some of the history and legends associated with the plant.

CULTURE

In the garden these plants prefer the sunny, hot, dry spots that many of our regular annuals and perennials don't like. This makes them ideal candidates for the south or west sides of houses and garages as long as there is good drainage and full sun. Other drought tolerant plants can be grown with them to provide flowers later in the season. They are good in combination with Pussy Toes, Three Flowered Avenas, Harebell, Coneflower, Western Silvery Aster, June Grass and Side Oats or Blue Grama Grass. They don't do well in a flowerbed with other plants that you are watering regularly. This will cause them to drown out. Since the plants are low growing and not invasive they are excellent candidates for sunny rock gardens as well as dry perennial beds and foundation plantings. Mixing sand into the area to be planted will help to improve drainage for them too. They do not grow well in a lawn for several reasons: 1. Kentucky Bluegrass lawns have very competitive roots that will crowd them out. 2. The leaves, which are required to manufacture food for next years flowers, would be cut off when the lawn is mowed.

You can set plants out in the garden anytime from May to October. Plants can be purchased or started from seed. To start them yourself, stratify (a cold, moist treatment) for 6 weeks and then germinate at 15-20 degrees Celsius (60-70 degrees F). They take 1-2 weeks to germinate. Seed in January to be ready to set outside in May or June.

When talking with people about the Prairie Crocus some people have commented that they have never seen our Manitoba emblem in the wild. I'm sure that this is becoming more common as our population becomes more urbanized and more habitat is destroyed. I encourage everyone to get out and participate in the spring ritual of looking for the Crocus and to try these "Ears of the Earth" in your garden.

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