

Saffron Crocus



Crocus is native to Asia Minor, the European continent, its foliage is grass-like and its goblet-shaped flowers vary greatly in colour. There are many species, in general they can be divided into spring flowering - the flowers appearing with or before the new leaves; and autumn flowering - the flowers blooming in full leaf. The spice saffron comes from the autumn flowering species *Crocus Sativus*. It has purple flowers, and its famous saffron is obtained from its reddish stigmas, which when dried becomes the spice saffron. Saffron is used in domestic economy as well as in medicine and the arts; it has been highly prized since Greek and Roman times, the extravagant Roman Emperor Heliogabalus is said to have bathed in saffron-scented water, while Cleopatra was not so wasteful, she only used a face wash of saffron to keep her complexion blemishes free!

Arab traders introduced saffron to Spain, where its richness of colour and flavour were appreciated, from there saffron assimilated into the cuisines along the Mediterranean, then it spread to Britain where it was extensively grown in Essex, in the town of Saffron Walden (renamed from Chypping Walden), its coat of arms bore three saffron flowers pictured with its turreted walls. Saffron Hill, now a London thoroughfare was once part of the gardens where quantities of saffron were grown. Saffron production from Essex thrived for some 400 years, together with the fabric dyeing industries that developed in the same area.

To the nations of Eastern Asia, the colour of saffron was a perfect beauty and its aroma perfect ambrosia. Saffron yellow shoes were part of the attire of the Persian Kings. In India, shortly after Buddha died, his monks made saffron the official colour for their robes. The scent of saffron was valued as much as the dye, in Greek and Roman times, saffron was strewn on the floor in banquet halls, courts and theatres. It is said that the streets of Rome were sprinkled with crocus petals when Nero made his entry into the city.

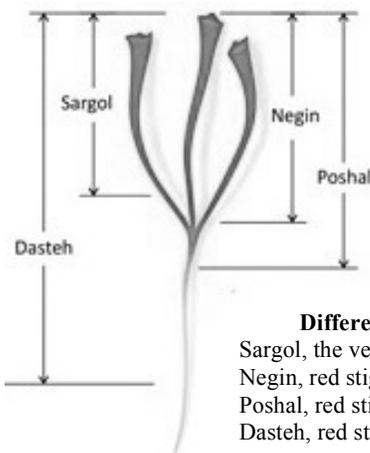
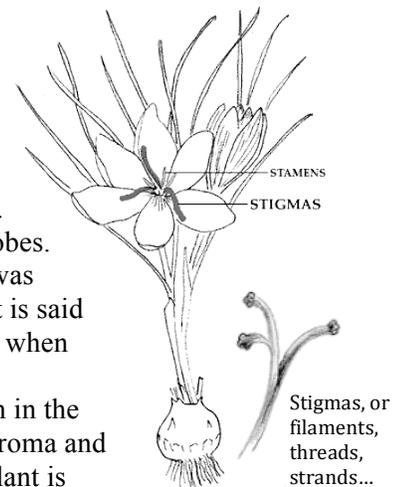
Nowadays, there are a few different varieties of saffron in the spice market: Spanish, Kashmiri, Iranian, Greek etc. the aroma and colour strength of the spice vary according to where the plant is cultivated and what part of the stigma is being used. On the home front, I understand that Tasmania has started to produce some saffron, unfortunately sold at quite a high price due to the high cost of labour.

The flowers of the *Crocus Sativus* have three bright red orange stigmas. The stigmas are handpicked from each flower then spread out to dry either in a sieve or on silk-lined trays over hot charcoal embers. An estimated 200,000 flowers are required to make 1kg of saffron, this labour intensive effort makes saffron

the most expensive spice in the world. Saffron stigmas are referred to as filaments, threads, strands, silks etc. Saffron is also available commercially in powdered form but it is hard to be absolutely sure of its purity, since there are a number of saffron substitutes such as turmeric or safflower petals. Saffron powder was dangerous stuff to fool with: according to old record, in the 15th century in Germany, conviction for adulterating saffron carried the death penalty, offenders were burnt at the stake, along with their bags of impure saffron!

To make your own saffron powder, all you have to do is lightly toast the strands in a hot dry frying pan, then crush them in a mortar and pestle. Better still, you can soak the filaments in warm water until the colour starts to leech out and each stigma swells and becomes pale as it yields its pigment, then you can use the precious liquid to cook your favourite dish. When cooking rice by the absorption method, just sprinkle a few strands of saffron in the water, the result is glorious golden rice with pale gold veins of saffron stigmas! Saffron has a distinctive and lingering aroma with certain warmth. Use it sparingly to avoid a bitter medicinal aftertaste. Saffron is used traditionally to colour and flavour Indian rice dishes, Italian risotto and Spanish paella. Its unique colour and subtle flavour go well with fish, seafood, and chicken. The famous French seafood soup *Bouillabaisse* is flavoured with saffron. Saffron is also widely used in sweet recipes like rice puddings and custards. Baked goods flavoured with saffron include the famous Cornish Saffron Cake. Saffron is also one of the ingredients in the Liqueur Chartreuse, Alcoholic Bitters and Vermouths. In industry, saffron is used in perfumes and dyes. In medicine, saffron is used as a sedative, diaphoretic, antispasmodic, and expectorant. Saffron 'tea' flavoured with brandy is believed to be an old domestic remedy for Measles. Some medical scientists believe that extracts from saffron can lower blood pressure, stimulate respiration and constrict blood vessels.

Saffron is generally taken as a tea or decoction and sometimes taken in wine.



Different grades of saffron

Sargol, the very best part of red stigmas
 Negin, red stigmas only
 Poshal, red stigmas and top part of style
 Dasteh, red stigmas and entire style