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# From my Garden

## by H.E. Bates

If you were asked to name a family of flowers that would give you blooms for seven months of the year, four of them in the winter, what would be your answer? Carnations, gladioli, roses, lilies, chrysanthemums? All correct, of course, if you are thinking of florists' shops. All wrong, however, if you are thinking of gardens.

The answer is crocuses; not so much the 'fat dummies', as Reginald Farrer called them, that flaunt their orange, purple and white goblets in the gardens of March and April, but crocus species, those delicate autumn and winter butterflies that begin to open in September and proceed to defy the laws of winter by proclaiming spring in November. Of these Farrer himself listed some 50 species in his *The English Rock-garden*, though today a good modern catalogue will offer you more than sixty.

So little known are these to the average gardener that every year, in November or December, without fail, I find myself having a conversation that goes something like this:

'How is your garden?' I am asked.  
'Oh, pretty untidy still. But anyway, the first crocuses are in bloom.'

'Crocuses! You can't mean it? In winter? But then, ah! you live in the south. It's so warm.'

Perfectly true, I live in the south, though it so happens that this strip of Kent is not particularly warm but is, or can be, cursed with a chilliness that is at times positively arctic. No, the blossoming of crocus—I should say the *unfailing* blossoming—in mid-winter has nothing whatever to do with warmth or latitude or shelter. It depends wholly and solely on the species you plant. No protection is needed for these delicious hardy little beauties—except protection from mice and birds, with which vexed subject I will presently deal.

I now give, therefore, a list of species that will ensure an almost continuous blossoming from September to March, the full glory of which is reserved for February. *Crocus speciosus* and *C. zonatus*, the first a bright blue gem from Eastern Europe and Asia Minor, the second a lavender beauty with white anthers and an exterior orange band painted across the base of the petals, will together fill the whole of September.

In October, not invariably, but at least in three years out of five, comes the loveliest of galaxies in shape of *C. laevigatus*, from Greece, a miniature feminine creature rising from delicate grass-like foliage, opening to its full flat lavender loveliness at the merest touch of winter sun. These lavender stars will persist for no less than two months, through Christmas into January, when the larger, richer *C. imperati*, from southern Italy, replaces them with goblets of richest lavender, orange-hearted, not at all



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unlike a small edition of the winter-flowering *Iris stylosa*.

Before this most gracious thing has finished flowering, the crocus race is really on. *C. susianus*, a small golden cup heavily striped with dark chocolate, comes from Russia; *C. tomasinianus* and its various hybrids, from Yugoslavia, sends up its myriad naked sapphire blossoms by the thousand when really established, one of its chief virtues being that it seeds itself all over the place, even crossing itself with other species, so that some of its subsequent prodigy are of a deep purple shade, almost identical with what I think is my first favourite, *C. etruscus*, which provides February with a positive banquet of delight.

Side by side with it comes *C. chrysanthus*, from Eastern Europe, the type being pure yellow, the dozen or so hybrids of it ranging from white (*C. chrysanthus Snow Bunting*) to rich blue (*C. chrysanthus Blue Bird*, *Blue Giant* and *Blue Pearl*) together with a pert little minx, striped blue and white, called *Lady Killer*. Perhaps the loveliest of the yellow hybrids is one of the oldest, *C. chrysanthus E. A. Bowles*, named after a celebrated gardener, and like all the rest a

prodigious self-sower. *C. aureus*, another yellow, also belongs to February, as does *Veneus Vanguard*, with its miraculous combination of lavender and French grey, its whole appearance being of an exceptional purity. These two, the latter coming from the Swiss Alps, the former from Asia Minor, are parents of Farrer's much-despised fatties, which carry the blossoming into April.

This list is, of course, by no means complete; it merely offers a pattern of continuity. I conclude therefore with two more words of praise and a stern injunction. Unlike so many tulip species, which I propose to deal with in a subsequent article, these crocuses are long-lived, some of mine having been planted for more than 30 years. Left alone they also increase with amazing generosity.

The stern injunction: beware mice. For some infuriating reason, mice have an uncanny way of sensing and searching out newly planted crocus bulbs. In my long experience they scarcely ever touch an established bulb. But they will wreck, in one night, your entire new-bought stock. Be utterly ruthless, therefore. They must be stamped out before the word gets round the mice world that the new season's sweetmeats are in. Bulbs should, by the way, be planted in August and September.

Oh! yes, and a final warning about our friends, our fickle friends, the birds. The answer to these mischievous petal-destroyers is a network of black cotton.