

Fall-flowering Bulbs

Gardeners generally associate bulbs with springtime displays of tulips, daffodils, hyacinths and crocus. However, some bulbs actually begin to flower in fall, just as most plants are going dormant.

The best known and earliest blooming of the fall-flowering bulbs



is *Colchicum*. Commonly referred to as the autumn crocus or meadow saffron, colchicums are not related to crocus at all, but are actually members of the lily family. Beginning in mid-September and continuing into early November, colchicum produces large, goblet-like blooms in shades of pink, violet or white. In spring,

colchicums offer relatively large, broad leaves which are, unfortunately, a favourite food source for slugs and snails.

There are quite a number of suitable colchicums for Newfoundland, but they are often hard to find locally, so mail-order nurseries are the best source. Species that do well include: *Colchicum autumnale*, *C. speciosum*, *C. Byzantinum* and, and *C. agrippinum*. Hybrids include: 'Autumn Queen', 'Lilac Wonder', 'The Giant', 'Violet Queen', and the double-flowered 'Waterlily'.



Another increasingly popular group of fall-flowering bulbs is the true autumn *Crocus*, relative of the typical spring crocus. The earliest species bloom in late September, while other varieties may not bloom until December; during mild falls I've actually picked autumn crocus on Christmas Day! Like their spring-blooming cousins, fall crocus produce narrow, grass-like leaves in

spring. Although there are some dozen species of autumn-flowering crocus only a few are hardy in our area. The most common and readily available is *Crocus speciosus*, which has purple-blue flowers from late October until December. *Crocus kotchyanus*, *C. longiflorus*, *C. pulchellus*, *C. medius* and *C. nudiflorus* are other species that may be tried.

The other fall-flowering bulb, *Cyclamen*, is perhaps the daintiest of the fall bloomers, offering a profusion of pink or white flowers shaped vaguely like a shuttlecock. They bloom from late August through early November. Unlike crocus or colchicum, cyclamen produce their leaves just before, during or just after flowering. These leaves stay green through the winter months and do not disappear until July. Their leaves are often attractively marbled light green to silvery over a dark green background. The most popular species is *Cyclamen hederifolium*, but perhaps the loveliest is *C. purpurascens*.



All of the mentioned bulbs are hardy in zone 5. Provide them with a moderately fertile, well-drained soil (a heavy wet soil will quickly cause them to rot). When first planted, generally in September or even August if possible, the addition of bonemeal or a high phosphorous fertilizer, is beneficial. In early May, the addition of a general garden fertilizer or good compost will further add to the plant's longevity. As with the spring bulbs, allow their foliage to die down naturally so the bulbs can accumulate the reserves necessary for future bloom.

Autumn crocus, colchicum and cyclamen are ideal for the rock garden where their fall flowers are easily seen among the other low-growing plants.



While the leaves of crocus and cyclamen are relatively tidy, colchicum foliage is so large and floppy, that many gardeners find them unsightly in the rock garden. One exception is *C. agrippinum*, whose foliage is relatively small and an interesting grey-green colour. This species also offers checkered pink flowers, a unique feature among colchicum.

Crocus and colchicum are also suitable for inter-planting among low groundcovers such as periwinkle, creeping jenny, lily-of-the-valley or bugleweed. The advantage of this setting is that the groundcovers prevent autumn rains from splashing mud onto the flowers. True autumn crocus may be naturalized in lawns as long as the foliage gets a chance to ripen before the first spring mowing. All three groups also lend themselves to woodland settings as they can tolerate dappled shade (cyclamen actually prefer part-shade).

At one time, gardeners bought their bulbs in fall and had to wait until spring to enjoy the blooms. By growing some fall-flowering bulbs, the reward is much more immediate.

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