Crocuses Herald the Arrival of Spring
By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Each year many gardeners, including myself, eagerly await that first crocus blossom to unfurl. It doesn’t matter what species or color it is, for it signals spring weather and the beginning of the gardening season are just around the corner.

These spritely flowers belong to a group of about 80 species most of which are natives of the Mediterranean regions and parts of southwest Asia. This area is noted for its dry summers and wetter winters. Bulbous plants from this region typically grow roots throughout the cooler, moister periods. With warmer and longer spring days, foliage, flowers and seedheads develop. As temperatures climb and moisture decreases, leaves brown and die back but plants will restart growth once cooler fall temperatures and rainfall arrives.
While lumped into the general spring flowering ‘bulb’ category, crocuses are derived from an underground food storage unit known as a corm. Corms are composed of a solid white starchy material. Each corm contains enough nutrients to allow for initial growth and development. As the growing season progresses, the old corm dies and a new one is formed. Healthy plants may also form numerous baby corms (cormels) around the new corm. Crocuses can propagate themselves by these cormels and also, in many cases, by producing seed.

If you purchased some crocus bulbs last fall at your local garden center, chances are they were various hybrids of the more common Dutch crocus (*C. vernus*). Cheerful flowers come in shades of purple, lavender, white, cream, and yellow. Often they are striped or streaked with a second color. These Dutch crocus hybrids generally are more vigorous with larger flowers than many other crocus species.

That’s not to say that these other species should be dismissed. While more frail and delicate in appearance, they can withstand the often harsh early spring weather like that Monday snowstorm that just occurred. Blossoms close up when cloudy and wet weather is coming but unfurl as the sun returns.

Among my favorite species crocus is *C. chrysanthus* ‘Cream Beauty’, a pale, buttery yellow and the Scotch Crocus (*C. biflorus*) with its unique white and purple striping. There are dozens of other species crocus to grow, even some that bloom in the fall. They are not expensive so feel free to try some that sound interesting to you. Also by planting different species, bloom times can be extended for a month or more. Those planted in more sheltered areas will also bloom ahead of schedule.
The chalice-shaped flowers appear stemless but the stems are underground. Thin, grass-like foliage continues to grow and develop long after flowers fade. As with all bulbs, the foliage should be allowed to yellow and die naturally if you want the plants to continue returning each spring. This is usually not a problem if the bulbs are planted in flower beds. If they are to be naturalized in lawn areas, select the earliest flowering species crocuses for early blooms and earlier developing and ripening foliage.

While not too picky about soil types, crocuses bloom best in full sun. Make sure their planting spot is well drained. While crocuses would prefer to go through a dry dormant period in the summer, they can hold up in irrigated beds as long as they have excellent drainage. Corms are planted about 3 inches deep in the fall. Group a half dozen or so together for a jewel box effect in planting beds, under trees or shrubs or along paths. After a few years, if clumps seem crowded and blossoms sparser, it may be time to divide. Lift clumps after blooming as the foliage dies down, separate the corms and plant in other areas.

As their blossoms start to fade and foliage continues to develop, give your crocuses some fertilizer so they have the nutrients they need to photosynthesize and develop a new healthy corm. Without a soil test, apply fertilizer at the rate recommended on the package. Scratch it in lightly. Fertilizer can also be added to garden beds as the bulbs are being planted in the fall.

While few insects and diseases bother crocuses, I think they are on the voles top 10 list. My two suggestions are to plant hundreds of crocuses each year (last year I planted 200) as they can’t eat them all or to plant the bulbs in wire cages. Too busy to make my own, I have found that suet cages on their sides house 6 corms rather nicely. Bury them about 3 to 4 inches deep.
Enjoy spring’s colorful crocuses now. While their beauty is fleeting, their longevity means they will serve up a taste of spring for years to come. If you have questions about crocuses or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.