



**C**OLCHICUMS (*Colchicum* spp.) enchant me. Perhaps it's because they awaken from dormancy in late summer or fall when most of the garden is winding down. Certainly part of their attraction is their botanical weirdness of blooming leafless with a tube of petal-like tissue passing for a stem, while their leaves and seedpods are a spring-only event. And I never tire of locating new varieties to grow in my garden.

My fascination with colchicums began years ago when, as a novice gardener, I mistook the four-inch-wide, foot-tall foliage emerging in my new spring garden for tulips planted by the previous owner. I waited for them to bloom so I could figure out what kind they were. It wasn't until autumn, when the dainty, crocuslike blossoms appeared, that I realized they

As summer fades and trees turn red and gold, colchicum flowers emerge to grace the garden at ground level.

BY KATHY PURDY

were *Colchicum byzantinum*. Since they had been growing in a garden that had been neglected for close to 10 years, in unamended clay, in retrospect this species was a good one to cut my colchicum teeth on. It's virtually indestructible.

Charmed, I began seeking out other selections with flowers in different shades and forms, with an eye to varied blooming

times. Now every September I eagerly anticipate the first colchicum flowers of the season. And because I've added many species and hybrids to my gardens over the years, the flower display extends for weeks.

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The genus *Colchicum* is named after the ancient kingdom of Colchis, which is now part of the Republic of Georgia. The approximately 50 species of *Colchicum* are native to the temperate parts of Europe and Asia east to Turkey, Iran, and the Caucasus. A few species hail from western China and India.

Many gardeners, hearing them called by their common names, autumn crocus or meadow saffron, may not realize that despite a superficial resemblance, colchicums belong not only to a different genus than

**Producing as many as five fully double flowers per corm, *Colchicum* 'Waterlily' benefits from the support of surrounding foliage.**

crocus, but a different family as well (see “Colchicum Botany,” page 20). Other more old-fashioned names for this genus are a lot more fun: naked ladies, naked boys, and son-before-the-father—all alluding to the emergence of the leafless or naked flower stems in fall.

### OUTSTANDING SPECIES

There are so many attractive *Colchicum* species and hybrids that choosing among them can be the biggest challenge. Most flowers grow from two to 12 inches tall, and their tepals—the undifferentiated perianth segments that include both petals and sepals—are typically shades of pink, lavender, or purple; there are a few stunning white selections as well. The flowers of some species are tessellated—tepals display an interesting checkered pattern.

The following are some of my favorites. The bloom times may vary a bit, depending on where you garden. Unless otherwise indicated, these selections are rated for USDA Hardiness Zones 5 to 9 (many will tolerate Zone 4 with protection), AHS Heat Zones 9 to 1.

Among commonly available colchicums, tessellation is most distinct in *C. ×agrippinum*. John Bryan, author of *Bulbs* (Timber Press, 2002), suggests that this interspecific hybrid is likely the result of a cross between *C. autumnale* and *C. variegatum*. An early fall bloomer, its narrow lilac-pink tepals, checkered with dark purple, open almost flat. It grows three to four inches tall.

Commonly called meadow saffron, *C. autumnale* bears up to six pink flowers per corm; each grows four to six inches tall. If you're looking for a big show without having to buy many bulbs, this vigorous species, which multiplies rapidly, is a good choice. As you would expect, flowers are white in the cultivar 'Album'. The cultivar 'Nancy Lindsay' is a rich lavender-pink from the tips of the segments down through the perianth tube. It blooms the third week of September for me. Two elegant double-flowering cultivars worth growing are 'Pleniflorum', which bears rounded, pink blooms, and 'Alboplenum', a showstopper with an abundance of narrow white tepals. I enjoy the latter paired with *Aster* 'Purple Mound,' with a purple-leaved bugleweed (*Ajuga* spp.) covering the ground between them.



**Top:** The heavily tessellated flowers of *Colchicum* ×*agrippinum* grow three to four inches tall. **Above:** Although small, the delicate blooms of *C. autumnale* 'Album' are borne in abundance.

The tessellated, purplish-pink blooms of *C. bivonae* are goblet shaped and grow six inches tall. According to garden designer and horticultural consultant Russell Stafford at Odyssey Bulbs in South Lancaster, Massachusetts, gardeners in warmer

climates should check out *C. bivonae*, which is hardy only to Zone 6, as well as hybrids with tessellation that indicate *C. bivonae* parentage.

Although individually the lavender-pink flowers of *C. byzantinum* are only the size of

a large crocus and grow to a height of five inches, each corm produces a dozen or more in early fall. A prominent white line runs down the center of each tepal. The corms multiply quickly and are a good choice for naturalizing in grass. The cultivar ‘Innocence’, sometimes listed as *C. byzantinum* ‘Album’, is a lovely white-flowered selection with the same general floriferous character as its lavender counterpart.

The blossoms of *C. speciosum* are large enough to be mistaken for small tulips. They vary in color from pale pinkish-purple to deep purple, often with a white throat, and grow to 12 inches tall. There are several notable cultivars: ‘Ordu’ is less tulip-shaped than most forms of the species, also hardier (to Zone 4) and earlier to bloom. Its flowers are a soft violet with white centers. Both tepals and stem



The tulip-shaped flowers of *Colchicum speciosum* range from pale to deep pink. This species has given rise to a number of outstanding hybrids.

of ‘Atrorubens’ are a deep wine-purple. ‘Album’ bears white blooms. The corms multiply quickly.

### SPECTACULAR HYBRIDS

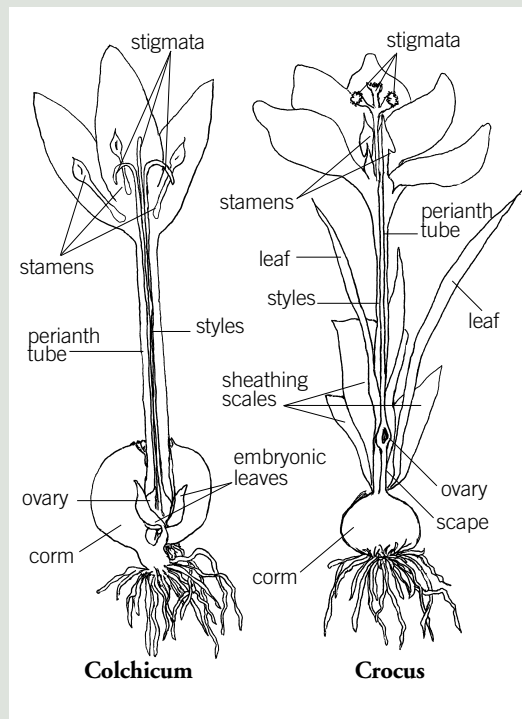
The first time ‘Lilac Wonder’ bloomed for me, I wondered if perhaps I didn’t plant it deep enough, it flopped so. It turns out ‘Lilac Wonder’ has a reputation for floppiness. I eventually planted some where the flowers could swoon over the edge of a rock wall. It blooms generously in mid-to late fall. The amethyst-violet flowers grow about eight inches tall.

## COLCHICUM BOTANY

First, let’s get this straight: they are not crocuses. They are not even close cousins. Crocuses are in the iris family (Iridaceae), colchicums in the colchicum family (Colchicaceae). Superficially, they do look alike, and what’s more, there are a few crocuses that bloom in autumn, as well as a few uncommon colchicums that bloom in the spring. So how do you tell them apart? You’ll just have to count stamens, the male part of the flower that consists of anthers and filaments. Colchicums have six stamens; crocuses only have three.

Colchicum flowers emerge from a corm, which is a modified stem. The ovary, or seed producing part of the plant, is at the base of the corm, nestled between embryo leaves that won’t emerge until the following spring. In the fall, when a colchicum is blooming, everything you see above ground, and some of what is below ground, is part of the flower, or perianth. The corm is all the stem a colchicum has, so what looks like a flower stem is actually a perianth tube, made of the same tissue as the perianth segments (also called tepals). The styles (female reproductive part) of the colchicum go all the way down that tube, below soil level, to the ovary at the bottom of the tube.

Starting shortly before flowers emerge, and all through the winter, colchicums are actively growing; the leaves emerge anytime from late fall to very early spring, attaining their full height about the same time as daffodils are at peak bloom. If the previous year’s flowers were fertilized and produced seed, you might see a seedpod at this time, nestled in the inner whorl of foliage. In more than a decade of growing colchicums, I’ve only seen this happen twice. The seeds, if you manage to harvest any, can take up to three years to germinate. —K.P.



I really like colchicums with purple tubes such as ‘Poseidon’, which has a robust nature and multiplies rapidly. Its large lavender-purple flowers grow six to eight inches tall, and it blooms in my garden from mid-September through early October.

With its pointed, twisted, purple-blotched white petals, ‘Harlequin’ doesn’t resemble any other member of the genus. Some gardeners have described the flowers, which appear in mid-September, as ugly, but I think they are cute.

As its name implies, the lilac-mauve goblet-shaped flowers of ‘The Giant’ are

very large. Eight inches tall and lightly tessellated, they appear in a succession of up to five per corm in September and October.

‘Violet Queen’ bears its five- to seven-inch-tall royal purple, fragrant flowers early in fall. Tepals are pointed and strongly tessellated and are marked with a white stripe down the center of each.

‘Waterlily’ is a large, double-flowered hybrid that grows five to eight inches tall. Emerging late September through mid-October, each lavender-pink flower opens wide and may have as many as 20 tepals. It’s a favorite of Becky Heath, co-owner of



The tepals of the colchicum hybrid 'Harlequin' curve inward, sometimes with an irregular twist, giving the purple-and-white flowers an unusual shape.

Brent & Becky's Bulbs in Gloucester, Virginia. "It's later blooming, double, and large, so this one really makes a statement," says Heath, "and because it's sterile, its flowers seem to last longer."

The dark secret of colchicum commerce is that when you order a certain colchicum, what you may get instead is a misidentified hybrid. Because the leaves and the flowers appear at different times for most colchicums, botanists have a difficult time identifying them in the field,

and one plant ends up with several names. Furthermore, many parts of the colchicum flower change color as it matures; the bud may emerge white and gradually take on color, the styles may change color, and tessellation may grow fainter or become more distinct. I have even observed different blossoms from the same corm blooming in deeper shades because they were subjected to a hard frost while in bud. It becomes more understandable how the corms become

misidentified after you've seen colchicums pull these tricks for yourself.

## COLCHICUM CULTURE

Although often found growing on stony slopes or subalpine meadows in the wild, most of the readily available colchicums will grow in any good, well-drained garden soil. In my garden, they thrive in both full sun and half-day sun. Where summers are hot and dry, plant them where they will have some shade during the heat of the day.

Based on my experience, any colchicum listed as hardy to USDA Zone 5 is worth trying in Zone 4, provided you have excellent drainage, which is especially critical when the snow is melting and the ground is just beginning to thaw. That is when the corms are most likely to rot.

## A DRUG AND A POISON

Colchicums are the source of colchicine, a potent and highly poisonous alkaloid compound that has been used to treat gout and some other ailments. Colchicine is also used to induce polyploidy—multiple sets of chromosomes—in breeding plants such as daylilies and Siberian iris.

Colchicine is probably what keeps deer and rodents from eating colchicums. They're poisonous to humans, too, but apparently not to slugs, which sometimes cause moderate damage to colchicum blossoms.

Conversely, in warmer areas with plentiful rainfall, corms can rot in the summer if they lack the requisite drainage. Heath notes that colchicums are not bothered by the heat and humidity typical of the mid-Atlantic growing seasons. "What may bother them is having too much water when they are dormant," she says. Generally, soil that drains well enough for dianthus or lavender will make colchicums happy as well.

If you order bulbs through the mail, the catalog will usually specify a deadline earlier than that for its other offerings, because the corms will often bloom without soil if shipped with traditional fall bulbs. If this happens, the corms can still be planted. Be sure to cut back the old bloom first. The leaves will come up in spring, and it will



Above left: The best time to plant colchicum corms is when they are dormant in midsummer. Above right: The wide, straplike foliage of colchicum emerges in spring. Seed pods from the previous autumn's flowers have formed in the center of this whorl of leaves.



flower the following fall. To avoid having to delay your gratification for a season, order early and plant promptly.

Plant the corms as soon as they arrive, setting them so that the broadest part of the corm is about three inches below the soil level. In most species and hybrids, flowers emerge from the corm between late August and November, although a few species bloom in winter or spring.

In early spring, new leaves will emerge. Depending on the species, these can last well into summer. Once they wither, the corm enters dormancy and water should be withheld. This is the best time to divide the corms. Many colchicums will multiply rapidly, especially when divided regularly.

## COLCHICUMS IN THE GARDEN

The most difficult part of growing colchicums is deciding where to put them. *Colchicum* foliage emerges in very early spring—as early as crocuses and even earlier in warmer climates. Depending on the variety, leaves can be up to six inches wide and a foot long. Although some people like the spring foliage, it definitely looks ragged as the plants move towards dormancy. And then they disappear altogether, but you still have to leave room for the flowers that will emerge in fall.

In *Essays on Gardening in a Cold Climate* (Whitfield Press, 1998), Brian Bixley describes interplanting colchicums with *Geranium himalayense* and *G. endressii*. The ground-covering geraniums provide bloom and foliage generous enough to hide the dying colchicum leaves. Bixley suggests mowing the geranium foliage in



**Top:** The soft-purple flowers of *Colchicum byzantinum* are particularly attractive interplanted, as they are here in the author's garden, among purple-leaved groundcovers such as bugleweed. **Above:** Colchicums are also attractive when naturalized in lawns.

late summer so that the display of colchicum blossoms is unobstructed. The geranium foliage grows back as the colchicum flowers die off.

Ellen Hornig of Seneca Hill Perennials Nursery in Oswego, New York, planted her colchicums against “a drift of my fanciest silver-centered, blue-leaved *Arisaema sanguineum*.” This pairing has multi-season benefits. “When the colchicums bloom, their color goes well with the blue arisaemas; before they bloom, the arisaemas will draw the eye up and away from the absent colchicums; and in spring, before the arisaemas emerge—they come up in July—the colchicum foliage will distract from the absence of the arisaemas.”

I've achieved a similar effect by positioning colchicum corms diagonally in front of daylilies. The foliage of both

## Resources

**Autumn Bulbs** by Rod Leeds. Batsford Publishing, London, 2005.

**Bulbs** by John Bryan. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2002.

**A Handbook of Crocus and Colchicum for Gardeners** by E.A. Bowles. Van Nostrand, New York, 1952.

**The Pacific Bulb Society (PBS).**  
[www.pacificbulbsociety.org](http://www.pacificbulbsociety.org)

## Sources

**Brent and Becky's Bulbs**, Gloucester, VA. (877) 661-2852.  
[www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com](http://www.brentandbeckysbulbs.com).  
Online and print catalog free.

**Fraser's Thimble Farms**, Salt Spring Island, BC, Canada. (250) 537-5788. [www.thimblefarms.com](http://www.thimblefarms.com).  
Catalog online.

**McClure & Zimmerman**, Friesland, WI. (800) 883-6998. [www.mzbulb.com](http://www.mzbulb.com).  
Online and print catalog free.

**Odyssey Bulbs**, South Lancaster, MA. (800) 517-5152. [www.odysseybulbs.com](http://www.odysseybulbs.com).  
Catalog online.

plants emerges early, but the colchicum leaves grow faster. By the time the daylily leaves are fully extended, the colchicum leaves are dying back. In fall, when the colchicums bloom, I cut down the daylily foliage, which is usually looking ratty by then.

I might never have started growing colchicums if there hadn't already been some here when we moved in, but now I love walking around each autumn and discovering them all over again. At a time when the rest of the garden has a “been there, done that” look about it, colchicums make their appearance, boldly naked and confidently marching to their own natural rhythm.

*Garden writer Kathy Purdy lives in Chenango Forks, New York.*