

SAFFRON AND WALDEN

Saffron comes from the saffron crocus, *Crocus sativus*. The name comes from the Arabic word *za'faran* meaning yellow. From ancient times it has been prized as a rich yellow dye, for its fabled medicinal powers, and for the intense colour, flavour and aroma that it brings to cooking. It is still the world's most expensive spice, and at times the crop was literally worth its weight in gold.



Saffron crocus

The purple flowers appear daily for about three weeks in late September and October, and are picked every morning. Saffron is produced by drying the three red-gold stigmas, also known as chives. The petals and the yellow styles and stamens are discarded. The plant is sterile and produces no seed. It is propagated through dividing the corms. The plant is not native to Britain. Its origin is thought to be Asia Minor.



"The spice saffron, formed by the anthers of *Crocus sativus* and once much cultivated around Saffron Walden in Essex." From Elizabeth Blackwell's *Curious Herbol*, 1737/9. (Courtesy of the Chelsea Physic Garden)

Saffron was used by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, and spread to Kashmir, India and China. It seems that the Arabs introduced saffron to Spain, and that returning Crusaders took it to northern Europe. Legend says that a single stolen bulb was smuggled into England by a pilgrim from the Levant.



The saffron trade was at its peak in the 16th century. King Henry VIII's yellow hose may well have been dyed with saffron. It was the custom to present gifts of saffron to visiting dignitaries and monarchs. By 1717, when King George I visited, the crocus was no longer grown in Walden and the Corporation had to buy saffron from Bishop's Stortford.

Local records of 'tointers' and dyehouses suggest saffron was used as a yellow dye for wool in the mediaeval cloth industry. The crop was cultivated by 'crokers' for more than three hundred years, from about 1400 to 1700. The spice was sold on St Ursula's Fairday, October 21st, and at the Newport fair in November. A flourishing trade brought prosperity to the mediaeval market town, and its name changed from Chipping, or Market, Walden to Saffron Walden. Writing in *Britannia* in 1586, William Camden noted "the fields here on every side smell sweetly, and smile pleasantly with saffron".

The importance of the local saffron trade is shown in the town's documents and seals. The first record in 1444 concerns 'tithes' (church taxes) of saffron collected by the vicar.

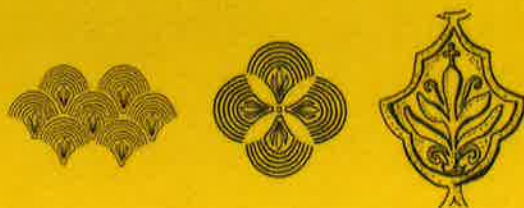
In 1514, Henry VIII granted a charter to the townspeople. The document's borders are decorated with crocus flowers. A further charter granted by Edward VI in 1549 has a seal attached showing "walls with four towers, gateway and portcullis enclosing three saffron flowers", suggesting 'saffron walled-in'!



Saffron 'Walled-in' on the town's coat of arms.



Saffron crocus can be seen decorating historic and modern buildings, including the parish church. Eight flowers are carved in a beautiful late 15th century 'spandrel' in an arch in the south aisle, facing the south door.



Crocus designs appear frequently in pargetting, a form of decorated plasterwork used on the exterior walls of timber-framed buildings.



The demand for saffron fell as herbal remedies were replaced by new medicines, synthetic dyes were developed, and cheaper saffron was imported from the continent. At the end of the 18th century the saffron crocus had virtually disappeared from the neighbourhood.

By the mid 19th century, the saffron crocus was almost forgotten. An 1850 edition of Culpeper's *'Complete Herbal'* mistakenly colours the flowers yellow.

Although the flower is now described as 'shy-flowering', Saffron Walden Museum is trying to revive the tradition of saffron growing by selling corms in mid-August for late autumn flowering.



A DYING TRADE

"*Warme, dark nights, sweet dewes, fat grounds (chiefly the chalky) and misty mornings are very good for Saffron, but frost and cold doe kill*". This valuable but vulnerable crop flourished in the soils between Walden and the Gogmagog hills in Cambridgeshire. Small saffron grounds, or gardens, were surrounded by dead hedges, or hurdles, to keep out cattle, hares, hogs and sheep. Planting, harvesting and drying required "*greate travaile and dilligence*" since thousands of blooms are needed to prepare a single ounce of saffron.



The hottest summers produced the highest yield, with up to 100 pounds of 'wet' saffron per acre. This was reduced to 20 pounds of 'cake saffron' when pressed and dried over a small moveable clay kiln "*about half the bigness of a beehive... a gentle fire of charcoal under it*". The average crop was 12 pounds an acre. Prices ranged from 12 shillings a pound in 1548 to over £4 a pound in 1666 and "*yealdeth no small advantage*" to the grower. However, the trade died out and the last known local saffron was half an acre grown in Duxford in 1816.

Nathan Maynard of Whittlesford wrote in 1845: "*A great deal was grown in this parish. I have been told by persons now living who remember how it was cultivated. A piece of good land... was well manured... 30 to 40 loads of dung laid on an acre. The bulbs were fresh planted every three years*". Maynard drew on local memories for this sketch of saffron gathering. "*The picking of saffron was a time of hilarity and some very strong beer was brewed expressly to be used at the time - the picking went on daily from the earliest dawn of morning until 10 or 11 o'clock, Sundays and working days*".

During the Middle Ages spices and cloth were traded by merchants throughout Europe. In 1374 the theft of eight sacks of saffron led to the 'Saffron War' in Basle. Although the penalties were severe, the trade's high profits were always a temptation to adulterate saffron by adding substances such as safflower or marigolds. Mediaeval cooks, physicians and dyers used saffron liberally, and monks used saffron instead of gold to illuminate their manuscripts. It was used to colour hair, nails, lace and leather as well as cloth. Venice was the most important commercial saffron centre in Renaissance times. Fashionable 16th century Venetian ladies covered their hair with saffron, honey, egg yolk and sulphur, then sat in the sunshine until the desired yellow shade was achieved.

Saffron Garden True.



Saffron Garden True, 1716, from *Botanologiae The English Herbal* by William Salomon M.D.



Portrait of a Lady in Yellow, painted about 1465 by Alonso Badoer, one of the leading artists of mid 15th century Florence.



Safflower, *Carthamus tinctorius*, known as dyer's thistle or bastard saffron, is still commonly sold to the unwary in place of true saffron. It lacks saffron's flavour or aroma, but can be used as a vegetable dye on natural fibres. It produces a range of shades from yellow to pink and red, and was traditionally used to dye the cotton 'red tape' used to tie up government documents.

Saffron was used to dye silks, wool and linen to clothe the wealthy, for Flanders tapestries, and by carpet weavers in Persia. The pigments present are *crocin* and other carotenoids, which produce a range of yellow-gold shades on different fabrics.

Florence was the centre of the Mediterranean woollen industry for weavers and dyers, and at one time saffron blossoms appeared in the corporate coat of arms.



Copper

Tin

Alum

Iron

Saffron is a direct, or substantive, dye. Unlike many dyes, this means that no additional substance is needed to act as a mordant to fix the colour to the cloth. When dyeing, mordants can be added to the dye bath to alter the shade, for example copper with saffron will produce a greenish-yellow. The most common chemical mordants are alum, copper, chrome, iron and tin.



THE SPICE OF LIFE

There is a long history of saffron remedies in traditional medicine throughout Europe, India and China. Although it is toxic in excess, it had a reputation of miraculous powers as a stimulant, sedative, antispasmodic and aphrodisiac.

Reverend Harrison, Rector of Radwinter, wrote of saffron in 1577: "in wine, it not onlie keepeth a man from drunkennesse, but incorageth also unto procreation of issue". According to John Gerard, apothecary to King James I, "moderate use is said to be good for the head, maketh the senses more quicke, and maketh a man merry" but too much "causeth headache and is hurtful to the braine". Furthermore "some have fallen into an immoderate convulsive laughter which ended in death".



This wall painting dating from the 2nd millennium BC was excavated on the Greek island of Thera (Santorini). It shows richly dressed women gathering saffron. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans appreciated saffron as a perfume, cosmetic, dye,

medicine and cooking ingredient. Cleopatra used it to improve her complexion by clearing the liver from an excess of bile. Roman physicians recommended rubbing a paste of saffron into the heads of mad people. Apicius, the 1st century AD Roman gourmet, left us his recipes for fish, flesh and fowl, including a saffron, plum and wine sauce for poached eels.

Tudor cooks used a saffron wash to gild or 'endor' meat and pastry. *The Queen's Closet Opened*, a book of 'receipts' published in 1663, includes two dozen saffron recipes used in Henrietta Maria's kitchens. There is no local tradition of cooking with saffron, unlike Cornwall with its saffron buns and old saying "As dear as saffron".



Today, saffron's main use is in cooking. Heating releases a spicy aroma, a bitter-sweet flavour and exotic yellow colouring. Mediterranean and Indian dishes lend themselves to saffron's special character, including paella, bouillabaisse and risotto. Less familiar are Sweden's St Lucia day saffron buns baked on 13th December.



Colchicum autumnale, Twice Banning Mele Salien.



Care must be taken not to confuse saffron crocus with the meadow saffron, *Colchicum autumnale*, which is poisonous. The autumn crocus has six stamens instead of saffron's three. It flowers in early September but its fleshy leaves come in spring, hence its popular name of 'naked ladies'. The herbalist Culpeper thought of meadow saffron; "The roots are held to be hurtful to the stomach, therefore I let them alone".

Meadow saffron from John Gerard's *Herbarie of Plants*, 1597.

How to cure the Yellow Jaundice without Medicine, or giving any thing to the Patient whatsoever.

Take the patient's morning urine, and put the same into a bottle; and take a small piece of saffron, and tie it up in a fine piece of muslin, and put the same in the bottle amongst the said urine, and only desire the patient wholly to abstain from drinking either milk or malt liquor for one month. Proved a great number of times.

This prescription alone is worth more money than the price of this book.



Remedy from Mr Nicholas Culpeper's *Complete Herbal and English Physick*, first published in 1653.

Most saffron used now is grown in Spain, often on small family plots. The finest quality comes from the high plains of La Mancha. It is also cultivated in Italy, France, Greece and Turkey, and in Kashmir and Iran where labour is cheap. It remains very expensive as it is still planted, picked and separated by hand, and takes many hours to produce even a small quantity. Labours are well-rewarded, with retail prices of £612.50 for 100grams in the supermarkets of 2001. Some cooks substitute turmeric, known as Indian saffron, as yellow colouring at only £3.83 for 100grams, but it lacks saffron's distinctive aroma and flavour.



This remedy was found among the papers of John Player who died in 1836. 'Hollands' is gin. It is not known what it was meant to cure.

Even in recent times pharmacists sold penny packets of saffron threads to make a 'tea' to cure measles. Modern medical research has shown that saffron is rich in vitamin B₂. It improves digestion, stimulates circulation and lowers blood pressure. There are also signs that it is effective in reducing tumours and aiding memory loss.

