

NAMES.

- A. زعفران
- g. Kpoxo.
- L. Crocus.
- I. Zaffrano.
- g. Saffran.
- h. Safran.
- L. Aczafran.
- D. Tanne-saffran.

SAFFRON.

PARTS USED.

only the Style
or Pistil.

PREPARATIONS.

A Tincture, A
Spirit, a Syrup,
an Extract,
and Plaster
or Oxyoro-
cum.

PLACE.

Cambridgeshire
and Essex.

TIME.

Blossoms in
Sept. or Oct.



DESCRIPTION.

The Root is a Solid Bulb, covered with many thin coats of a fine Thready matter, and compressed top and Bottom. The Fibres grow round the bottom of the Root; long, and white as the Root. The Flower rises from the Centre of the Root, uncompassed with Leaves, inclosed in a Whitish Skin. The Leaves are long, Narrow, of a deep Green, smooth, with a white Rib in the Middle. from the Centre of the Leaves enclosed in a white film rises the flower, having Six Leaves of a very light purple at the upper Edges Striped which nearer the stalk becomes a Deep Rich Shining purple. The Three Styles are red like Velvet open and Jagged at the Top but uniting in the Stalk lose their colour and become a Transparent white. The Chives are white at the Bottom becoming purple where they join the Apices, which are white, covered with a Gold Coloured Formosa, magnified—a leaf cut Transversely.

VIRTUES

Saffron is a high Cordial.

T. Stobbe delin.

C.H. Heimerich sculp.

A Bloom of Love? How Saffron
Crocus Took Root in Japan

Plants seldom figure in the grand narratives of war, peace, or even everyday life in proportion to their importance to humans. Yet they are significant natural and cultural artifacts, often at the center of high intrigue (Schiebinger 2004, 3).

Let's be honest, how much did you spend on flowering plants this month, or for Valentine's Day alone?

If you have ever hemorrhaged money for love, look no further than this essay for company. In 1886, a Japanese man named Soeda Tatsugorō (dates unknown) paid five *yen* in exchange for five pea-sized corms from Europe. For perspective, this sum is equivalent to one month's starting salary for an elementary school teacher in Tokyo at the time (Morinaga 2008, 398). So for a villager hailing from Kanagawa Prefecture like Soeda, it was surely a substantial investment in the five corms for their blooming potential.

What Soeda procured were the corms of *Crocus sativus*, a plant commonly known as saffron crocus and known for its extravagant stigmas, "saffron." Sought after as a valuable spice, dye, and/or medicine, saffron can cost up to tens of thousands of US dollars per kilogram even recently, a combined result of the labor-intensive harvesting process and the measly yield of three hand-picked stigmas per flower (McConnon 2016). Soeda's determination to acquire saffron crocus over a century ago was additionally impressive because it involved more than making a substantial financial decision. What he planted took root not only in soil but also in history. With those five corms, Soeda Tatsugorō made a name for himself as the pioneer of the domestic cultivation of saffron crocus in Japan (Shimoyama 1906, 410).

As an exotic medicinal herb, saffron crocus received dedicated examination from Japanese scholars no later than the eighteenth century. It was one of the six medicinal substances that physician Ōtsuki Gentaku (1757–1827) detailed in *Rokumotsu shinshi* (Record of Six New Things), his two-volume publication prefaced in 1786. Living up to his reputation as a *rangakusha*, a scholar of Western learnings, Ōtsuki drew intentionally and extensively on Dutch texts and translations as source materials. Citing Rembert Dodonaeus (1517–1585), Johann Jacob Woyts (1671–1709), and other European scholars, Ōtsuki described saffron crocus as a product of Western countries. The wide range of therapeutic effects of its stigmas included stimulating menstrual flow, inducing abortion, and delivering placenta (Ōtsuki [1786?], 12–16).

In the ensuing century, saffron remained an import. By the 1880s, a vocalized interest in domestic saffron cultivation had emerged among agronomists. The November 1884 issue of the official journal of the Greater Japan Agricultural Association (Dai Nihon nōkai) included an illustrated guide on the planting and care of saffron crocus. To encourage domestic cultivation of the economic plant, the article invited interested parties to contact the Association to obtain corms from Europe (Manase 1884, 55).

It does not seem to be a sense of entrepreneurship that initially motivated Soeda to embark on a multi-year journey of trial and error growing saffron crocus. For lack of a better word, it was about love, a specific kind that is void of romance but no less powerful. Soeda came to take an interest in

the plant because of his aged mother, who needed to take saffron regularly for a chronic gynecological illness. “Whatever it takes, I wished to obtain it easily, and in the fourteenth year of Meiji [1881], I heard that saffron is made from a foreign plant, which became the reason why I aspired to cultivate saffron crocus in the first place” (Soeda 1900, 1).

It was not until five years later that Soeda found an opportunity to have a contact bring back five corms from Europe. Even then, he was uncertain of the corms’ authenticity. In fact, they were so small that it took three years for Soeda to see any of them bloom. His first harvest consisted of the stigmas of merely three flowers in total, but a comparison with sample saffron was able to convince Soeda that he had not been swindled after all. What he had been painstakingly caring for were indeed real saffron crocus (Soeda 1900, 1). In December 1897, Soeda’s saffron received certification from the Yokohama branch of the Hygienic Laboratory (Eisei shikenjo), a predecessor to the present-day National Institute of Health Science. The saffron he produced fully met the standard of quality required of a Japanese Pharmacopoeia Drug. In the ensuing years, Soeda became a saffron supplier to the Ministry of the Imperial Household (*ibid*, 6–7). He sold the corms he had produced to fellow Japanese cultivators, too. The biggest ones he sold could bloom the same year they were planted, and even those cost only 0.1 *yen* each (*ibid*, 18).

This essay could end on a feel-good note about how one son’s filial love bloomed into a prosperous business. Yet the truth is that I came across Soeda’s story due to a much darker reason: researching the impact of gynecological disorders on the life of women and their immediate family. The illness Soeda’s mother suffered—a feminine “blood” disorder—not only sits at the very center of my dissertation project, but was also a reason for chronic debility among mothers and at times the cause of harrowing sacrifices their children made as long-term caregivers. It is in the genre of paragons of filial piety that Soeda’s story fits, where narratives about devotion and healthcare rarely conclude with a happy ending without a hefty price.

Available primary sources do not permit an evaluation regarding what incentivized Soeda more—an interpersonal filial love or the moral pressure of filial duty? One thing, however, is certain. It was within a mother-son relationship that the transnational movement of a highly valuable plant began to take shape. The naturalization of saffron crocus in Japan therefore offers not only an anecdote about a great plant but also an opportunity to appreciate how ordinary individuals’ motivations and relationships shaped the landscape of both nature and history.

Featured Image

Saffron crocus (*Crocus sativus* L.): flowering stem with separate floral segments and bulb and a description of the plant and its uses. Coloured line engraving by C. H. Hemerich, c.1759, after T.Sheldrake. Wellcome Collection. Public Domain.

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