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FLORA IN SWITZERLAND

The Herbstzeitlose

The Herbstzeitlose, called autumn crocus in English, is native to Europe but has been introduced to Canada and the U.S., where it is both grown in gardens and lives as a wild escapee in meadows and woodlands. It should be noted that it is not a crocus, and it is not saffron, and should definitely not be used in place of saffron in cooking because eating any part of this plant can kill you.



Autumn crocus (Herbstzeitlose)

The Herbstzeitlose is a perennial herb in the lily family (Liliaceae) which grows from a corm (a solid bulb) that can unfortunately be mistaken for a wild onion. The rapierlike leaves grow about a foot high, and in early autumn one or two leafless stalks sprout from the corm; each stalk produces a single white-to-purplish-pink flower that resembles a crocus.

The extreme toxicity of this plant has been known since the times of ancient Greece, but in the fifth century, herbalists in the Byzantine Empire discovered it could be used to treat rheumatism and arthritis, and the Arabs began to use it for gout. The useful active ingredient in the plant is an alkaloid called colchicine, which is still used to treat gout and which has anticancer properties. Colchicine, or

rather the dried plant, was used for murder by poisoning. In the Middle Ages, the dried bulbs were worn around the neck, as a protection against the plague; the result, however, was less than overwhelming.

Poisoning from this plant resembles arsenic poisoning; the symptoms (which occur 2 to 5 hours after the plant has been eaten) include burning in the mouth and throat, diarrhea, stomach pain, vomiting, and kidney failure. Death from respira-



Colchicum autumnale L

tory failure often follows. Less than two grams of the seeds is enough to kill a child; a specific antidote doesn't exist, so treatment typically involves pumping the stomach.

Colchicine is used by plant breeders; it produces bigger cells and consequently bigger plants - that is why e.g. strawberries have become bigger.

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