



Fall-blooming saffron crocus closely resembles its spring-blooming cousin.

Pretty flower could become cash crop

You are familiar with the crocus, that welcome harbinger of spring. But another member of the same family that blooms in the fall is the source of the world's most precious spice – saffron. Now University of Vermont researchers are looking at the potential of making saffron Vermont's newest cash crop.

Arash Ghalehgolabbehbahani, an Iranian post-doctorate student and Margaret Skinner, a research professor of plant and soil science and UVM are working on the project.

Last summer in a test planting of 24,000 of the crocus plants, they delivered almost four times as much saffron per square meter as the average yield in Iran, the largest saffron-producing country, and more than twice that of

the next-largest producer, Spain, according to Arash. He theorizes the organic-rich Vermont soil may be the reason.

Based on the current retail price of about \$19 per gram, the researchers estimate that saffron could generate revenue of about \$100,000 per acre – which would make it Vermont's most lucrative greenhouse-grown crop, Skinner says. By comparison, maple syrup – one of Vermont's most profitable products – brings in about \$1,320 per acre of trees, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data. Harvesting however is very labor intensive. Harvest requires precise selection of each stigma by hand – intensive labor that drives the spice's high price.

Because the saffron crocus may not survive an especially severe winter, the test used a high clear tarp tunnel, a greenhouse-like domed structure that typically uses no heat or electricity. This is the same protection many farmers use to protect tender vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers and eggplants before temperatures allow them to plant outside.

"From a revenue standpoint we all know that growers make the most money on crops when they're growing them outside of the regular growing season," Skinner said, because prices for the vegetables drop when supplies are plentiful. That leaves a gap during the late summer and fall months, when growers could rotate another crop into their mix and make use of the tunnel. Saffron could help fill the gap. They tested planting in milk crates that can be moved outside when it's time to plant the tender crops in the tunnels, and it worked beautifully.

They will be experimenting further this season, and hope to get some commercial growers interested in the idea. Who knows? Saffron may join maple syrup as "Vermont gold."

Did you know?

Nearly 100,000 people may be spending their Saturday night crossing the Atlantic? There are more than 2,500 trans-Atlantic flights daily.

Pan American began trans-Atlantic airline service in 1939. United Airlines began offering 20-hour transcontinental flights in 1933.



Selfies can even be fatal – dozens have died taking selfies, including several at the Grand Canyon.

Selfies can be fun but...

If you have a smart phone, you have probably taken a selfie – perhaps hundreds of them. But some youngsters are finding that some of those “funny” selfies they posted online ages ago (last year, for example) may have nixed their opportunity to land that great job.

Worse, you have spent some serious money to go someplace simply wonderful – a stop on your bucket list. Then instead of soaking up the experience you have been dreaming about, you’re focused on taking a selfie to document it. Did you see that eagle flying overhead? Oops, no, missed that – too busy taking a selfie.

Even worse are the selfie sticks that extend your reach – and have been banned in many museums and other tourist attractions. Disney has forbidden selfie sticks at all of their parks.

Just like distracted driving being a serious safety hazard so too is the obsession of taking selfies. Zoos have had visitors doing very stupid things in order to get a picture of themselves with big cats or other carnivores. People have walked off cliffs taking selfies on mountain hiking trails. If you visit the Grand Canyon, you’ll notice many of the people there will be taking selfies rather than just standing there and taking in the majesty. The list goes on and on.

So the next time you are visiting one of those wonderful iconic places you’re always dreamed of, take the time to absorb the marvel you have come to see. And the next time you are having fun with cherished friends or family, focus on *them* and skip the selfie.

So what is a leprechaun?

There are around 40 million Americans who claim Irish heritage, almost seven times more than the entire population of Ireland. So it comes as no surprise that images like the leprechaun are popular, especially around this time of year. But although residents of Ireland sometimes find our portrayal of the leprechaun a trivialization of Ireland's rich and ancient mythology, the little fellow does have deep roots in antiquity. There are mentions of the tiny fairy sprite as early as the 9th century.

Some historians believe he may pre-date the Celtic settlement in today's Ireland and might even be a remnant of an ancient deity. What is fairly consistent in recent centuries is a description of a solitary fellow, often a trickster and sometimes evil and inclined to overindulge in beer and whiskey. He is by trade a shoemaker and he is associated with stories of a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Some stories say that this gold is saved from his work as a shoemaker, but others claim the tiny folk found the gold. One tale is the gold came from Viking invaders, who left coins scattered all over the countryside that the leprechauns collected. Historically, the Danish Vikings were the first to mint coins, mostly silver, in Dublin around 995. The legends of hidden hoards may have come from the Viking propensity of burying treasure hoards, some of which are being found to this day.

Until about a hundred years ago, leprechauns were often pictured dressed not in green but in red. But today the little trickster is firmly established in popular imagination as a little old man wearing a cocked hat, a leather apron, a green waistcoat, knee breeches, long stockings and silver-buckled brogues, always bearded and usually smoking a pipe.



Irish coins minted by Vikings in Dublin around 1000 AD.