

Crocosmia "Goldfinch"

Falling Stars

by Martin Blow, SpecialPerennials



Crocosmia are better known as "Montbretia" in Britain and have often have a bad name as invasive plants. However, there are lots of choice varieties that are less spreading and worthier of their other common name: "Falling Stars" after their cascade of brilliant, fiery, starry flowers.

These plants come from Africa and were previously thought to be winter tender needing to be dug up in late autumn and laid out to dry so that the corms could be stored indoors in winter. This is still good practice if your soil is water logged in winter and it also serves to reduce the spread of the plants as well. I leave the corms in the soil over winter as my garden isn't very wet or cold, except some of the very large-flowered varieties like "Emily Mackenzie" or "Star of the East"; I find these two often die out in frosty winters and these get dug up in October or November.

The plants like a moisture retentive soil in summer and this will gives bigger and more flowers.

By choosing different varieties you can have flowers from July to early October and plants from 1ft / 30cm to 4ft / 120cm tall.



"Lucifer" amongst regal lilies, rusty foxgloves and giant oats.



"Hellfire" is a little shorter and later to flower than "Lucifer" and has luscious, deep, velvety red flowers

Perhaps the most popular, tallest and earliest to flower is the orange-red “Lucifer” with his pleated leaves and long cascades of flowers. He will start flowering in July through to the end of August. Some people suggest he needs staking but I find that if feeding is kept to a minimum he is more stocky and self-supporting. Lucifer is wonderful for adding a touch of hot colour to a more subdued planting. In our garden we have him amongst regal lilies, rusty foxgloves and giant oats. “Hellfire” is a newer version of this old favourite and is a little shorter and later to flower and has luscious, deep, velvety red flowers.

Other tall varieties flowering in late July and August are “Rowallene Yellow” and “Rowallene Orange”: these two have the largest heads of flowers and are around 3ft / 90cm tall.

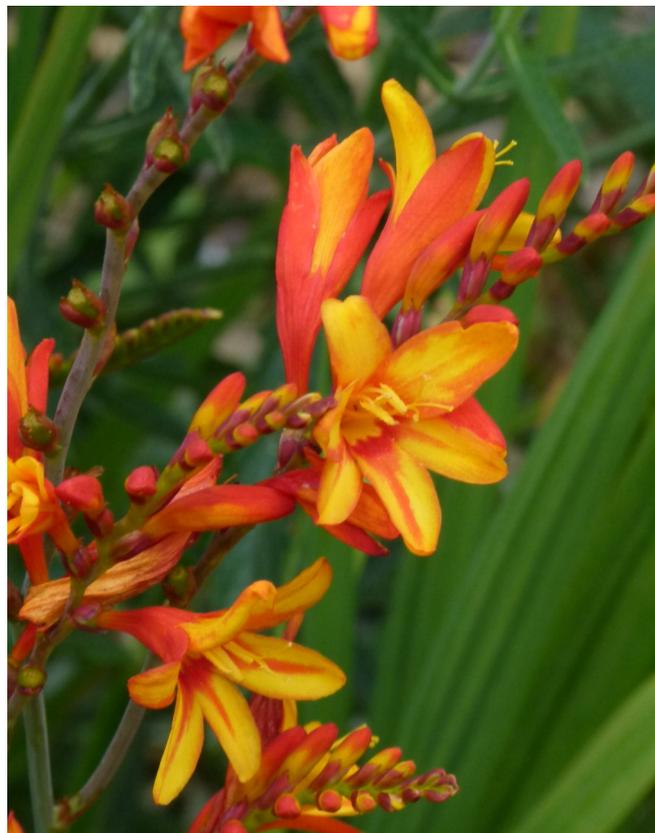
At the other end of the scale there are short varieties for the front of the border like the orange and yellow “Firejumper”, red and yellow “Jackanapes” and red “Gloria”. These grow to 1ft / 30cm or slightly less and their bold colourways are the highlight lining my paths and patio in August and September.

For a softer effect, there are some lovely pale lemon flowered varieties. All are very alike: you might find “Citronella”, “Sulpherea”, “Paul’s Best Yellow”, “Honey Angels” or “Morning Light”, there’s not much to choose between them. These are 1ft 6in / 45cm tall and flower in late August perhaps through to early October. The variety “Solfaterre” also has bronzed leaves.

“Pink” crocosmias always create a lot of excitement. Don’t expect rosy pink flowers: these varieties have a pinkish hue overlying a salmon orange background. Good varieties include “Limpopo” (short), “Mullard Pink” (medium), and C.pottsii “Culzean Pink” (taller but not too tall).

I plant Crocosmia corms in spring about 3-5in / 7-12cm deep and about 6in / 15cm apart although it isn’t crucial to be exact in this. I plant pot-grown specimens at any time other than winter, although I would only plant the more tender types in late spring. Pot grown plants can be planted anytime from spring to mid autumn unless you are really cold and wet in the winter when I’d stopped planting in late summer and keep later purchases in a cold greenhouse or cold frame over winter.

Once the shoots show through in spring keep the plants on the moist side. If a late, hard frost is forecast after the shoots are showing, I cover with garden fleece or a mulch, although established clumps will recover quickly from any frost burn.



“Firejumper” a short variety for the front of the border .



The yellow-flowered “Solfaterre “ also has bronzed leaves.

In cold areas, you can leave the old leaves on the plant in winter to provide some protection and choose a mild spell in late winter to cut them off before growth starts. Although the seed heads look attractive on the plant, cut them off before the seeds fall as seedlings might be inferior.

The long, sword-shaped leaves and arching racemes of flowers make an elegant addition to the garden. They mix well with most plants with hot coloured flowers and the yellow varieties tone well with blues, purples and bright pinks. They live up well to their African heritage, blending splendidly with exotics like cannas and brightly coloured dahlias.

Some gardeners find orange a challenging colour to place in the garden, and there are many, many orange varieties of Crocosmia. I find the orange flowers are set off nicely by deep reds and bronze foliage. Try following orange tulips with geums and then crocosmia against a backdrop of a bronze-leaved shrub or perennial.

These bright plants are easy to grow and invaluable for brightening up the garden in late summer and autumn. Keep an eye out for Crocosmia on our stall at Plant Hunters' Fairs and catch a falling star for your garden.

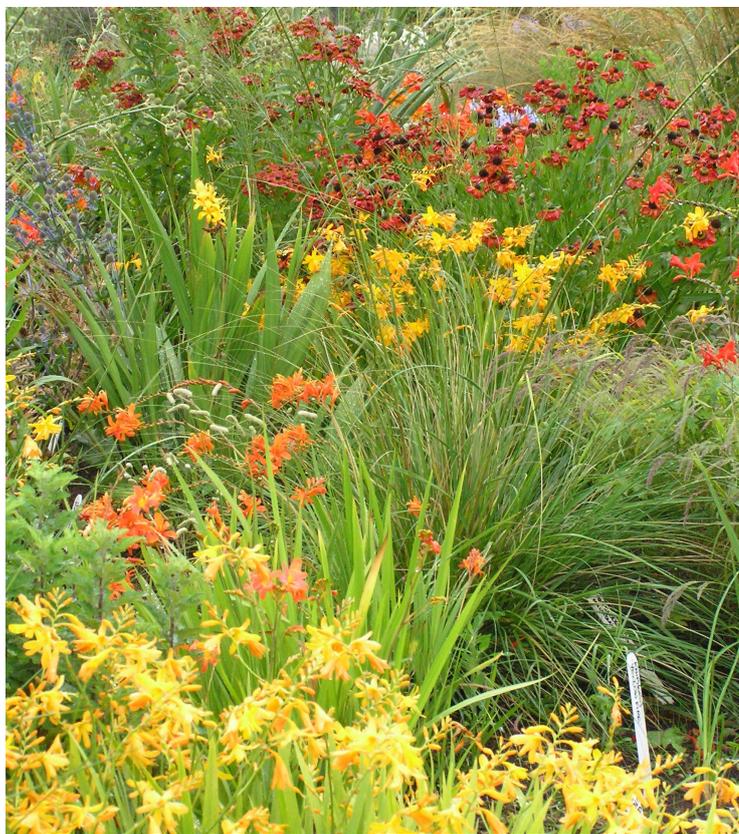
Happy Gardening, Martin.



"Limpopo" is one of the pinkish-coloured varieties.



Crocosmias blend splendidly with exotics like cannas and brightly coloured dahlias.



Crocosmia planned on mass with grasses and heleniums



C.pottsii "Tall Form" is set off by dark red Persicaria "Dikke Floskes" and bronze leaves of Actaea atropurpurea