

# Farm Wife Harvests Saffron: World's Most Expensive Spice



It's a time consuming affair to dry, measure, weight saffron on the apothecaries' scales, and keep records of the harvest, but Evelyn said that she thrives on tedious, detailed work.

## LOU ANN GOOD

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LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.)

While frost has numbed the brilliant show of autumn flowers across the county, a surprising phenomenon is taking place at the farm of Wade and Evelyn Groff. Every sunny fall day purple crocus-like flowers pop open along the meadow where the Holsteins graze.

These are no ordinary flowers. They're saffron, which contains the costliest spice on the market. The purple flowers cradle the reddish-orange stems or stigmas that are dried and used to season and color foods.

To see the hundreds of dainty purple flowers, which Evelyn gathers daily, one might derive that saffron is plentiful. But the bounty is deceiving, for it takes 70,000 flowers to produce one pound of saffron. If sold commercially, saffron rivals ounce for ounce the price of gold.

A few, who are as industrious as Evelyn, grow their own saffron to avoid paying the costly prices. But not everyone is willing to pay the price of an aching back and the tedious hours required to extract the saffron.

"Gardening is my thing," Evelyn said. "Nothing I like better than to grow than fresh vegetables."

The time-consuming business of plucking the flowers from the plants, sorting them into piles of 10, pulling the flower apart to remove the stigmas, drying the stigmas, weighing and packaging the saffron is pure pleasure for Evelyn.

"It's definitely a hobby but last year, I almost got tired of it because the biggest picking took me eight hours in one day," Evelyn said.

The flowers deteriorate rapidly if not picked each day. Ants and aphids get after the flowers, but Evelyn doesn't spray the flowers.

The appearance of the purple flowers is like a mystery. According to Evelyn, the plants lie dormant during the summer months until the end of September or beginning of October, when the foliage suddenly appears. Three to four weeks later the purple crocuses bloom over a period of three weeks. The foliage stays green all winter. The foliage is about three inches in height now and by the end of winter will be 12- to 14-in-

ches tall. During May and June the bulbs are completely dormant, with no signs that they are planted in the ground. But the work in the saffron patch continues as Evelyn must keep the area clean and free of weeds.

It's always a complete surprise for Evelyn to see how many plants will bloom. Each plant produces from one to three flowers.

"I have no idea how many will bloom until the day they bloom," Evelyn said.

This year, so far, the saffron flowers did not produce as large a harvest as last year. Evelyn suspects the rainy cool weather hindered the growth.

Last year's drought produced a bonanza crop and enabled Evelyn to give away and sell saffron. In addition, the bulbs multiplied profusely.

The saffron bulbs must be dug up and replanted every three to four years. The transplanting takes place during July and August. One bulb may multiply as many as 10 to 30 bulbs in a three to four year period. Evelyn replants the bulbs six inches apart. She gives away and sells many of the bulbs, which vary in price depending upon the size of the bulbs.

"It's a big job, and I don't make money at it," Evelyn said.

She finds pleasure in working with the plants and keeps extensive written records of where and when the bulbs are planted, how each is fertilized, and how much and when each plant produces.

Her record harvest was 2,023 flowers gathered in one day.

The stigmas are dried in the microwave. Evelyn places 50 of the stigmas in a custard cup lined with a paper towel. The microwave is set for two minutes. If they are not dry and wiry within that period, she sets the microwave for one minute longer.

The saffron is weighed and sold by grains. It takes about 17 grains to a gram. If stored in a dry, airtight container, the spice retains its flavor for many years.

While many believe saffron to be primarily a Pennsylvania Dutch spice, history proves otherwise.

"It's an old spice used in Egypt," Evelyn said. "According to the Bible, King Solomon used saffron."

When Evelyn first considered growing the spice, she did not know if the weather and growing

season of the county were compatible with the spice.

"But I looked on the map and saw that we live in the same latitude as southern Spain, where much of the saffron is grown," Evelyn said.

About 15 years ago, Evelyn ordered some saffron bulbs from a seed catalogue, but the bulbs did not grow. The following year, she heard of a countian selling the bulbs so she purchased 80. The first year, only one flower bloomed, which is typical for small bulbs.

"I read everything I could find about growing saffron," Evelyn said. "Saffron likes loose soil, bone meal fertilizer, and dry weather."

Evelyn also grows hundreds of gladiolus. Many of them are given to shut-ins whom she and husband visit as a ministry. The remainder are sold from their home at 644 Beaver Valley Pike, Lancaster, PA 17602.

Saffron is used to flavor many foods. To season noodles, rice, potpie, chicken corn soup, sweet potatoes, roast chicken, filling, potatoes and most other dishes, less than 1/2 teaspoon is required.

"If the flavor is too strong, most people don't like it," Evelyn said.

Many of the recipes that Evelyn uses are in her head, but here is one that she believes readers will enjoy making.



After Evelyn gathers the flowers, she separates them into piles of 10 for easy calculation. She has collected as many as 2,023 blooms in one day.

## YELLOW RICE

2 cups chicken broth  
1 cup rice  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
Small onion  
1 bay leaf  
1/2 teaspoon garlic powder  
Pinch saffron  
1/2 green pepper  
1 1/2 cups bite-size chicken.

Fry onion and garlic in oil until lightly browned. Add chicken broth. Bring to boil. Add remaining ingredients except chicken. Stir well. Boil one minute. Cover tightly and reduce heat to low for 20 minutes. Top with chicken.



The flower of the saffron plant is similar to a crocus.

Consumption of rice in the U.S. has doubled in the last decade. Americans now consume almost 20 pounds per person per year.

Over 80% of the nation's restaurants offer rice on their menu and 72% of them make it available to their patrons every day.

Rice is the single most important food in the world and is a major staple in the world's cuisines... rice is grown on all continents except Antarctica.



Curious Holsteins watch as Evelyn Groff daily picks the purple saffron flowers from which she extracts the reddish-orange stigmas to dry for saffron.

# Homestead Notes