Saffron: Abbruzzo's red gold

1 **Read *Abruzzo's red gold* and decide which of the words below can be used instead of those underlined in the passage.**

blossoms • colouring substances • commonly considered • darker • early morning • endangered • expensive • extremely costly • full • given as a reward for merit • however • lasting through many years • not compact • prevent • reduced to small particles by hand • reputation • requiring a high proportion of costs • taken away • to produce • top quality



Saffron is a spice derived from the flower of *Crocus sativus*, commonly known as the saffron crocus. This plant is a small showy, bulbous perennial (.....), with violet to bluish lily-shaped flowers. Saffron, thought by many historians to have originated in the Middle East, has been a highly prized (.....) spice since at least the 7th century B.C.E. and was also used as an ingredient in medicines, dyes (.....) and perfumes. Saffron is packed with (.....) powerful antioxidants (safranal, crocetin and crocin) which hinder (.....) the formation of tumours, improve memory function, lower cholesterol, help digestion, rheumatism and colds and even combat depression.

Saffron crocuses find their ideal *terroir* only in a dozen small areas across Europe, the Middle East and southern Asia. They grow best in friable, loose (.....), low-density, well-watered and well-drained clay-calcareous soils with high organic content. In Italy there are three such areas: Sardinia, Tuscany's Val d'Orcia and the Navelli Plain in Abruzzo. Navelli saffron, more often called L'Aquila saffron, is generally agreed to be (.....) the very best in the world: its stigmas are longer, its aroma stronger and its colour deeper (.....) than any other. In 2005, saffron grown here was awarded (.....) Italy's "protected product" status, like Parmigiano-Reggiano and Prosciutto di Parma, acknowledging its extraordinary culinary standing (.....).

Saffron is the most expensive spice in the world and worth literally more than its weight in gold (.....). Its production is very labour-intensive (.....): the flowers cannot be harvested by

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machine nor their delicate red stigmas can be tricked out (.....) with anything but the human hand. It takes about 100,000 flowers – and 500 hours of labour – to yield (.....) one kilo of saffron.



Saffron season is so brief, less than two months from planting to harvest. The bulbs are planted in August and produce flowers in October, although the exact moment depends on the weather. When the flowers blossom, they must be picked before dawn (.....), while they are closed, so as not to lose any of the stigma's powder. Harvesting lasts fifteen days. Harvesters pick every flower that sprouts up (.....) on a given morning, then wait for the others that come up the next day and so on. Each day, after picking, the orange, red-topped filaments must be separated out by hand; they are immediately dried over a fire of neutral wood, like almond or oak, which does not impart its flavour to the product. Once the moisture evaporates, the stigmas grow darker in colour; then, they are packaged whole in little glass jars or hand-ground (.....) into powder.

The tradition of cultivating saffron in Navelli has been alive since the 13th century but is now threatened (.....) by global competition, an aging population and the powerful earthquake in 2009 which disrupted the networks that got the spice to the global market. Nevertheless (.....), the vast majority of Abruzzo's saffron is still exported to other parts of Italy or to other countries. From its humble muddy fields, Abruzzo's gourmet (.....) gold has conquered the world.

2 Ask suitable questions to these answers.

a. It is a very expensive spice derived from the flower of *Crocus sativus*.
b. It contains antioxidants which prevent the formation of tumours, improve memory function, lower cholesterol, help digestion, rheumatism and colds and even combat depression.
c. It can be cultivated in a few areas across Europe, the Middle East and southern Asia.
d. A friable, loose, well-watered and well-drained clay-calcareous soil with high organic content.
e. The flower has longer stigmas and its aroma and colour are more intense.
f. The harvesting of the flowers and the removal of their delicate red stigmas must be made by hand.
g. Harvesting is in autumn.
h. It takes fifteen days. Each day before dawn, harvesters pick the blossomed flowers.

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