

Colorful Chrysanthemums

By Gloria Williams
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Plant now to bring vibrancy to your late-season garden

Amid the blaze of autumn colors, the flower that merits the title, “Queen of the Fall Flowers,” is the chrysanthemum, sometimes shortened to “mum.” It comes into bloom when the summer petunias and pansies have been done in by wind, rain and frost.

Mums have many good qualities to recommend them to home gardeners, as well as florists. In the U.S., it is the largest commercially produced flower for the market because of its ease of cultivation, ability to bloom on schedule, diversity of bloom forms and colors, and the lasting quality of the blooms.

Chrysanthemums come in a wide range of colors from white to shades of pink, rust, orange, yellow, maroon and purple. Their flower shapes are as varied as the colors. There are anemone mums with a single row of petals around a center, or spider and spoon mums with long contorted or rolled petals. The pompom mums are compact and almost round, while quill mums have long, narrow petals that grow in ragged disarray. Traditionally, the big fluffy mum called the football chrysanthemum may be the one you envision when you think of this flower. They were presented as a corsage to a fellow’s date at a football game. Sadly, this custom seems to have passed out of favor.

Chrysanthemum petals are actually small, individual florets. The disk florets can reproduce. This is true of all members of the very large composite family to which chrysanthemums belong. In a daisy, a close relative of chrysanthemums, the ray florets are the petals and the disc florets are found in the center or eye of the daisy. Seeds are produced in this part of the flower.

Chrysanthemums were described in writing as early as the 15th century B.C. The plant was revered as an herb by the Chinese and believed to have the power of life. Young sprouts and petals were eaten in salads and leaves were brewed to make a healthful drink. Boiled roots were believed to be a remedy for headache. Chinese pottery was decorated with images of the flower.

Later, in the 8th century A.D., Japan adopted the chrysanthemum as the crest and official seal of their Emperor. The Order of the Chrysanthemum is the highest order of Chivalry in Japan. They celebrate a national holiday, the Festival of Happiness, dedicated to this flower. Colonists brought starts of this plant to the new world and so continued the chrysanthemum craze in America. If all this makes you want to grow chrysanthemums in your own backyard, the process is actually quite simple.



First, pick your planting time. Garden chrysanthemums can be planted in spring or fall. If you buy in the spring, bear in mind that often, garden mums grown for spring sales have been forced into bloom. So, after the flowers fade, prune the plants back to one-third to one-half of their flowering height and they will bloom again in the fall.

When selecting your planting site, choose an area that receives full sun and is several feet away from street lights or other night lights, since exposure to light during the night may inhibit flower formation.

Chrysanthemums grow best in moist, well-drained soils. Avoid poorly drained, wet spots. Before planting, work the soil to a depth of 8 to 12 inches and incorporate 2 to 4 inches of organic matter, such as peat moss, well-rotted manure, or compost. Set the young plants 18 to 24 inches apart to give them room to develop into full, mound-shaped plants.

Keep your chrysanthemums well watered throughout the season. Fertilize spring-planted mums once a month through July with water soluble plant food. If you end up waiting till fall to plant your mums, you will not need to fertilize them at planting time.

Want more flowers?

If your chrysanthemums grow tall and leggy with few blooms, learn the art of pinching—periodically removing the growing tip and first set of leaves. Start in the spring when the new growth is 4 to 6 inches long. Pinch all shoots and flower buds every two or three weeks until late June; continuing longer will prevent flower formation. The plant will then grow new shoots and flower buds, and they'll bloom in the fall—right when you most want a little extra color in your garden!

Renovating the mum clump every 3 or 4 years also promotes healthy growth and continued flowering. When new shoots appear in the spring, dig up the entire root ball. Use a sharp spade to slice the root ball into wedge-shaped sections, like a pie. Remove and discard the point of the wedge (this is the oldest part of the clump). Then, plant the remaining portions.



Vibrant chrysanthemum colors can brighten any yard. *Photo by Trish Varrelman / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*