

Crazy for Chrysanthemums!

By Dawn Pettinelli

UConn Home & Garden Education Center

One of the loveliest sights during the fall, aside from the brilliantly hued New England foliage, is the wealth of colorful chrysanthemums. These forgiving and easily grown plants are native to China, Japan and parts of Europe. They come in an abundance of colors – almost every shade imaginable except for true blue.

Blossoms range in size from a diminutive 1 inch to more than 6 inches across. Plant heights start at about 1 foot reaching up to 3 feet depending on the variety or cultivar.

Named for the Greek word which means 'golden flower', chrysanthemums are a popular symbol throughout the world. To the Chinese they symbolize rest and ease; to the Japanese, happiness and longevity and they meant cheerfulness and optimism to the Victorians. To us New Englanders, mums mean summer has ended and cooler fall temperatures and increased precipitation should soon prevail.

Chrysanthemums comprise a very large genus of over 100 species. To date, some 3000 cultivars have been developed although many of the older ones are no longer in existence. New varieties are being introduced every year.

Most gardeners are familiar with the low-growing, so called cushion mums, which appear by the thousands at local garden centers, farm stands, supermarkets and big box stores come fall. These plants have the unique characteristic of being easily moved in full bloom, with a minimal amount of wilting, making them excellent candidates for a quick change or pick me up wherever fall color is needed.

One problem with planting them in the ground late in the season, however, is they often do not have enough time to get established before the ground freezes so they may perish over the winter, even if a hardy variety was selected.

The ideal way to grow mums is to obtain young plants in the spring. Not only will they have the whole growing season to get established but, often, your selection of colors, flower style and ultimate plant size will be greater. While it is too late to follow this suggestion this year, chances of winter survival are improved if you select plants with lots of basal sprouts and provide these plants with adequate winter protection.

Chrysanthemums flourish in a sunny, well-drained spot with fertile soil. The pH of the soil should be around 6.5 so be sure to add limestone every 2 to 3 years. Have your soil tested occasionally and follow the limestone and fertilizer recommendations. Mums have a shallow root systems which makes it a necessity to water the plants during any dry spells especially during the late, hot summer days when maximum

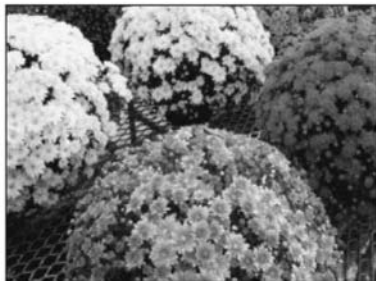


Photo by Dawn Pettinelli.

growth of established plants occurs.

Not only is abundant water needed for good flowering but, with mums being heavy feeders, for an excellent fall show they need to be fertilized on a regular basis. Begin in the spring with a sprinkling of a granular fertilizer as directed on the box. Then during the summer months, until color starts to show in the buds, fertilize with a half strength liquid fertilizer every 3 weeks.

Pinching, or removal of growth tips, is done to insure bushy, heavy blooming plants. This can be done 2 or 3 times until about mid-July. Plants that are not pinched, as well as those grown in too much shade, tend to be leggy and will often flop over following late summer rains. Plants that are pinched rarely need any form of staking.

Mums generally are not bothered by a lot of insects or diseases. Sometimes there are spots on the leaves caused by insect feeding.

As far as winter care goes, cut the stems back to about 4 inches after the flowers fade and late fall is upon us. You can let leaves accumulate in the stems or mulch with evergreen boughs after the ground freezes. As mentioned earlier, fall planted mums will especially benefit from a winter mulch as they will be less likely to heave out of the ground.

Those living near or traveling to the Storrs campus might want to check out the hardy mums that UConn Blooms has for sale. You can reserve your plants at (860) 486-6000. For directions or more information, visit: <https://web9.uits.uconn.edu/uconnblooms/>

Road trip enthusiasts might want to visit the greenhouse at Smith College in Northampton, MA. For years now, they have been wowing folks with beautiful cascading mums at the Fall Chrysanthemum Show. This year it will be held from Saturday, November 5 to Sunday, November 20. The greenhouse is open daily.

So enjoy your mums this fall, offer them some winter protection and they will provide you with years of late season, long lasting color. If you have questions about mums or on other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, or visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu.