



October Flower of the Month: Chrysanthemums

by Sue Rideout, Master Gardener

Chrysanthemums, a favorite in our gardens, have a very long history and a wide geographical range. Mums were first cultivated in China as an herb and described in Chinese writings in the 15th century B.C. In the 8th century they appeared in Japan and became so popular that a single flowered mum was adopted as the crest of the emperor. The mum was first introduced in the Western world in the 17th century and named Chrysanthemum, a combination of Greek words meaning golden flower. Colonists introduced the mum to America, where it became a fast favorite. There are over 160 species of mums, mostly native to China, Japan, and Europe. I will just touch on the types grown most commonly in our local area.

Chrysanthemums are often thought of as fall flowers but many of the daisy types bloom in spring and summer. Painted Daisy (*C. coccineum*) is a bushy 2 to 3 foot plant with single or double 3 inch flowers in pink, red, or white shades. Shasta Daisy (*C. maximum*) is a versatile summer-blooming perennial with showy white 3 to 4 inch flowers. Shasta daisies are easily grown from seed. Marguerite (*C. frutescens*) is a fast-growing plant bearing 2½ inch white flowers with yellow centers although some varieties have been developed in shades of yellow and pink. Marguerites are grown as annuals in our region. Feverfew (*C. parthenium*) is an old favorite for borders and cut flowers. Clumps of bright green leaves with a peppery odor send up stems with clumps of tiny white daisies.



Florist's chrysanthemums (*C. x grandiflorum*) are the familiar autumn blooming mums we see everywhere from our gardens to florists' displays to grocery stores. Also known as garden mums, these versatile flowers come in varied plant sizes from less than a foot to 6 feet tall, flower forms and sizes, and colors.

Flower forms include: anemone - a large raised center and one or two rows of petals; decorative - broad overlapping rays form a large full flower; pompom - a globular form; and spider or quill - long tubular rays. Fluted petals, curved rays, irregular petal length, and flattened tips combine to produce other flower forms. Colors include red, pink, white, yellow, bronze, orange, purple and multi-colors.

Garden mums are easy to grow. They like a relatively fertile soil—digging in compost before planting gives them a good start. Water them regularly but not to the point of soggy soil. Mulching around the plants helps to keep steady moisture in the soil. Mums like full sun but in our area, they appreciate a little afternoon shade. Since the bloom is keyed to longer nights (11 hours or more), it

is important not to plant mums under street lights or night lights—they might get confused and think it is still summer!

Chrysanthemums tend to grow with few side shoots, so pinching back new shoots when they are several inches long helps to produce bushier plants. But cutting back should be stopped by early to mid-summer in order to allow buds to develop for fall bloom. Gardeners who wish to produce large, exhibition flowers disbud all but a few buds on each plant. After flowering has finished, the stems should be cut back to about 8 inches.

Mums can be planted in early spring or, in our area, in the fall. Some types can be grown from seed but most come from nursery plants or, for a larger variety, from mail-order catalog starts. Since chrysanthemum plants should be divided every few years, new starts can be obtained from division and also from rooted stem cuttings. And if you have a potted mum, enjoy it inside until the bloom is finished, then cut back to about 8 inches and plant it outside for next year's pleasure.

Chrysanthemums make wonderful garden borders; their long-lasting blooms make great cut flowers for the gardener and the florist; and they give us brilliant blooms in the fall. So try some mums for your flower garden.

October 20, 2011