

Friday's Feature

By

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Mum's the word in fall color

The local garden centers are brimming with colorful baskets of potted chrysanthemums, or mums. This popular fall plant is a staple on holiday tables, near doorsteps and in fall seasonal bouquets. Although native to China and Japan, mums have become an American symbol of fall. Their popularity is due, in part, to the wide range of available colors, flower forms, and flower sizes.

When purchasing garden mums, select top-quality plants. Select varieties that will bloom early, in the middle and late in the season. It's best to purchase your mums when they have tight flower buds. The flower buds should be just open enough to see a little color so you know what you are buying. Avoid buying plants where the flowers are fully open, this indicates that they will soon be past their peak, and will shortly decline.

Once they have served their purpose as a potted plant, think about adding them to your landscape. You can create a big splash of color with only a few mums. Mums also mix well with other plants.



As with any plant, mums perform best when planted in the right location. They will grow and flower best if planted in full to partial sun. Six hours of direct sun is ideal. They grow best in well-drained soil that has been amended with organic material such as compost or shredded pine bark.

Space the plants approximately two feet apart. Put them too close and the results will be leggy, upright growth. If your mum is pot bound, be sure to spread out the roots before planting. Water them in well and mulch with a 1-inch layer of pine bark, pine straw or a similar material.

Since fall typically is a dry period, be aware that lack of water on garden mums delays flowering, slows or stops growth, and increases susceptibility to pest pressures. Proper moisture leads to a very successful

garden mum crop. Do try to avoid overhead irrigation however, since it will increase the chance of disease. Also do not soak mums at the base of the plant; this will increase your change of stem rot problems.

To keep plants disease free, many gardeners will simply replace their mums each year. New mums can be grown either by taking cuttings or by dividing and replanting new shoots. They tend to be very easy to root.

To maintain their compact, full form, be sure to pinch or prune frequently. Prune lightly from late spring through mid-August. Also be sure to deadhead mums by removing the spent flower blooms.

To make garden mums flower year after year, keep the soil moist (not wet) through the winter, prune lightly several times between March and June next year, continue mulching efforts, maintain good insect and disease management strategies and lightly fertilize next spring with a slow-release fertilizer.

Remember that mums have been bred extensively and nurseries have fine-tuned their techniques for making them bloom when we want to buy them. You will find that many bloom in the landscape earlier or later in years following the season you planted them. The plants will bloom according to natural daylength conditions next year.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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