Nothing says fall like a garden full of mums

A popular fall flower found on many holiday tables, near doorsteps and in fall seasonal bouquets is the Chrysanthemum. Chrysanthemums, or mums, are popular and colorful perennials that can live for years. Mums are some of the longest lasting cut flowers and potted mums can last for weeks indoors.

Many varieties of mums are available in white, pink, yellow, lavender, bronze, salmon, orange, or red. In addition to this extensive color range, flowers vary greatly in type and size.

The hundreds of cultivars of mums are classified by flower shape. One of the most popular flower types is the single or daisy form. Other flower types are anemone, spoon, spider, standard, and pompon. Pompons are double and ball shaped, spiders are double with long tubular rays and spoons are semi-double with spoon shaped rays.

When you buy potted chrysanthemums, look for healthy, well-shaped plants with many flower buds. It’s best to purchase your mums when they have fairly tight flower buds. Look for just a little color so you know what you are buying, but avoid the plants with wide open flowers. Once fully open they will soon be past their peak, and will shortly decline.

Once your potted chrysanthemums have bloomed, you can plant them in the garden and enjoy them for years.

In flower beds, chrysanthemums are best appreciated in large groupings, where they can be majestic when in full bloom. In small gardens or where space is at a premium, there are other, longer blooming annuals and perennials that will give satisfaction for a longer period of time than mums.

Chrysanthemums thrive in well-drained, slightly acidic soil that has been amended with abundant organic
matter. Choose a site that receives full sun. Satisfactory results may be obtained in semi-shaded situations where the plants receive full sunlight for at least six, continuous hours a day.

The plants should be set approximately 18 to 24 inches apart to provide adequate space for development.

After the plants have re-grown at least six inches, pinch off the top one to two inches of the stem. This will encourage lateral branching and produce lower, bushier plants. When the new shoots are six to eight inches long they too can be pinched. This is continued with the final pinch made no later than mid-August.

Two to three applications of an all-purpose fertilizer during the growing season will grow a good crop of flowers. Water the garden mums thoroughly to spread the fertilizer throughout the root area and to wash the fertilizer off the foliage. Mums in the ground are fairly drought tolerant once established.

Chrysanthemums are triggered to bloom only when the nights are long enough. During the summer, when days are long and nights are short, chrysanthemums in the garden grow vegetatively. Then as the period of nighttime darkness increases in late summer and early fall, flower bud initiation occurs.

That transition generally takes place here in September – with flowers opening from October through December. Plants generally stay in full bloom for about three weeks.

Mums are mainly propagated by division. Divide or thin plants, preferably in spring before rapid growth begins or in fall after blooming. If your plants are too small to divide, you can start new ones from tip cuttings in the spring and summer.

Chrysanthemums are relatively disease and pest free, although they may be attacked by spider mites in hot dry weather. If conditions are dry, keep watered, especially if the plant is potted or in bud. Fungal leaf spot can be a problem if plants are crowded and get poor air circulation.

Theresa Friday is the Residential 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. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: http://santarosa.ifas.ufl.edu.