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## ASK A MASTER GARDENER



**Chris Rusch**  
Master Gardener

**QUESTION:** What can you tell me about growing zinnias in my home garden? What is the origin of this lovely flower?

**ANSWER:** Zinnias are members of the Asteraceae (Aster) family and are closely related to daisies. They are a native of Mexico, but some forms of wild zinnias have been found as far north as Colorado and as far south as Argentina.

The first zinnia, *Zinnia peruviana*, was discovered in Mexico and brought to Europe by the Spaniards in the 1500s. This plant was known throughout Europe by the mid-1600s, but it was not cultivated much.

Dr. Johann Gottfried Zinn of Göttingen University in Germany wrote the first description of the plant and because of this, the zinnia is named for him. In 1796, a zinnia was brought to Europe, possibly by way of Brazil (it was presented to Linnaeus – the great Swedish scientist and medical doctor – and had been labeled *Calthe de Bresil*, the Brazilian marigold) and it was this zinnia, *Zinnia elegans*, which the world fell in love with.

*Zinnia elegans* is the ancestral plant from which our modern-day zinnias have developed. This zinnia produced larger, lush flowers in colors which ranged from crimson to pale lavender.

Perhaps the most profound development for the zinnia species occurred when John Bodger of Bodger Seeds Ltd. found a beautiful, natural mutation growing in a field of Mammoth zinnias. This zinnia had huge flowers, with an incredible number of petals. The plants were robust, and the variety appeared to be stable.

Over the next few years, the Bodger Seedhouse developed a strain of these dahlia-like zinnias which they called the California giants and introduced them to the world in the 1920s. America, Europe and Great Britain became enthralled with these lovely flowers and their spectacular array of colors. The rest, shall we say, is history.

Today there are more than 20 known species of zinnia, but only three are commercially available, *Zinnia elegans*, *Zinnia augustifolia*, a small daisy-like zinnia, and *Zinnia haageana*. Most popular garden zinnias belong to the species *Zinnia elegans* that offers many varieties in a diverse range of shapes, sizes and colors – something for everybody. Zinnias come in every color and hue except blue.

Zinnias are very easy to grow. They must have full sun. Zinnias prefer a composted, well-drained, neutral or slightly acidic soil. Water your plants about three times a week so that the soil stays moist to about 6-8 inches deep. Once zinnias are established, mulching with a 2 inch layer of straw or bark will help preserve soil moisture and prevent weed growth.

At flowering, a side dressing with an organic 5-5-5 fertilizer will produce numerous and bigger blossoms.

A little pruning can go a long way when growing zinnias in your garden. The more you cut zinnia blooms off, the more flowering will occur. Pinch zinnias when the first buds appear, back to above the leaf axil. This aids in producing long stems. Since zinnias thrive when their blooms are trimmed off, they are an ideal addition to your cutting garden.

Rather than allowing the flowers to be spent on the plants before deadheading, cut the mature flowers for use in bouquets to encourage blossoming throughout the season.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRIS RUSCH

# Growing Zinnias

great toll, since high humidity can lead to the development of powdery mildew, leaf spots and rot. Limiting soil splashing onto the foliage helps decrease foliar disease.

Zinnias are truly a flower for all gardens. If you want to instill a love of gardening in children, there is no better way to start than by having them grow zinnias.

Zinnias are easy to grow, quick to sprout and incredibly colorful. These qualities make them a perfect children's plant. Plantings of single or multiple mix colors, massed together, work best with children. California Giant mix and Oklahoma mix are two great seed packets to start with, but there are many pinks, purples, oranges and greens to choose from.

*Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu) or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the Oregon State University Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*

