

Ask a Master Gardener: Caring for chrysanthemums

Question: I couldn't resist purchasing some potted chrysanthemums from the local store to use in my fall decor, but I haven't a clue how to care for them. Can I plant them after they're done blooming, or just throw them away?

Answer: Chrysanthemums (or "Mums" for those of us who struggle with spelling or saying such a long name) are a festive, colorful solution to late season color. This time of year nurseries and storefronts are packed with these brilliant blossoms of yellow, orange, red, purple, bronze, pink and white next to piles of pumpkins.

The chrysanthemum was first cultivated over

2,000 years ago in China and has been the national flower of Japan for several hundred years. Here in America, *Dendranthema x grandiflora* has been

extensively hybridized to produce all kinds of colors, shapes and sizes.

Whereas most people

treat mums as annuals, discarding them after their fall bloom, they can easily be planted in large pots or into the ground to hold over to the following season. They thrive in full sun, well-drained soil and where there is good air circulation. The best time to plant them is in spring to ensure the plant becomes well-established, but they can also be planted in the late August or fall, keeping the well-drained soil moist but not soggy. Since they



Bonnie Courter
Master Gardener



PHOTO COURTESY OF BONNIE COURTER

Chrysanthemums, or 'mums' for short, are a colorful addition to any household during the winter.

are shallow-rooted, it's important to protect the roots with a layer of mulch such as shredded leaves.

Mums require some care throughout the growing season if you want to create that nice, rounded shape. These plants tend to grow tall and top-heavy when in bloom if they aren't pinched back at least two or three times during the growing season from spring to summer.

Pinching is the removal of about 1 inch of the tip of each branch or shoot to a leaf by snapping it out using your thumb and forefinger. The first pinch is done when the plant is 6 to 8 inches tall, then afterward, as each of the branches grows another 6 inches until the Fourth of July. This will result in a bushy, well-shaped flowering plant.

During the summer, be sure and water deeply, thoroughly soaking the

soil to a depth of 5 to 6 inches. Avoid frequent, light watering which causes shallow root formation and increases the chance of diseases such as mildew, Septoria leaf spot and Verticillium wilt spreading. They can also thrive with one or two light applications of a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10 during the growing season.

Mums respond best to soils that are slightly acid (pH 6.5) and that contain humus such as peat, leaf mold, or well-rotted manure.

Chrysanthemum flowering is determined by short day and long night temperatures, so naturally, they bloom as the days shorten and nights cool in the autumn. There are cultivars available that are early, mid-season or late types so you can plan to have mums blooming at different intervals.

Once blooms are done, trim off the dead stems

and mulch with shredded leaves. Mums tend to become crowded by the second year, producing less blooms. Fortunately, they can be divided in the spring, three to four weeks after the last spring frost or when there's considerable new growth. New divisions should be planted 18 to 24 inches apart in a garden or flower bed.

With a little care, your nursery chrysanthemum can thrive and provide autumn color for years to come.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.