

Ask a Master Gardener
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Chrysanthemums

Q. I love to see all of the mums blooming in the fall, but don't have any in my yard. Can you tell me how to grow and care for them? Tara C.

A. The National Chrysanthemum Society (NCS) (<http://www.mums.org/>) calls the chrysanthemum the “undisputed ‘Queen of the Fall Flowers’”. Chrysanthemums, or mums as they are commonly called, are in the Compositae or daisy family. Many of the modern mums are still daisy shaped, but others are much showier. Hybridizers have developed a wide range of colors, shapes and sizes. Today's colors include many shades of pink, purple, red, yellow, bronze, orange and white. Some are even multi-colored. Shapes range from upright to cascading.

They make beautiful fall displays in our home gardens. The seemingly unlimited variety of shapes, sizes and colors provides interest to small spaces; accents an area, such as an entrance; or a blast of color to large beds or borders from early fall until frost.

While mums are more available in the fall, they are best planted in the spring to develop strong root systems before blooming. However, this is one of those times when gardeners are at the mercy of retailers, so we have to plant when the plants are available, unless we are dividing and planting from our own stock. So the following time-lines are the ideal ones and you may have to adjust to fit the circumstances.

To grow chrysanthemums successfully, the NCS suggests the following brief time plan of action: January and February-plan your bed, what to grow where and get some catalogs to study; March-place your plant orders; April and May-prepare beds, add fertilizers as recommended in your soil test; June or when soil is warm-plant, pinch back plant tips after four leaves of new growth appear, put supports into place, watch for aphids, water as needed, fertilize weekly; July-water as needed, spray every two weeks for insects, make a final pinch about the middle of the month, fertilize weekly; August-fertilize weekly; September-check for buds, for larger blooms remove all buds except the large center one,

water, fertilize weekly, practice insect control, prune unwanted growth; October-remove any damaged buds, leaves and blooms, discontinue fertilizer; November-after all blooms have matured or been damaged by frost, prepare beds for over-wintering, cut plants back to 4 inches, removed plant debris from planting area and bury or burn it for disease control; December-relax.

Buy plants that are free of insects and disease. Most cultivars need to be planted by the first of July to bloom in late October or early November.

Mums do best in full sun, at least 5-6 hours a day, morning sun is best. Good drainage is essential. Raised beds can be used, if needed. Beds need to be placed away from large plants to avoid root competition. They need good air flow and should be located away from walls or other obstructions to allow for good air circulation. If you have little or no yard, they can be grown very successfully in pots. Just be sure to take these same conditions into consideration when placing the pots.

Chrysanthemums like a well-drained soil with a pH about 6.5 and plenty of organic material. It helps to add some standard fertilizer such as 5-10-5 and some super phosphate for root development.

Young plants and cuttings need to be planted at the same level in the soil as they are in the pot. The spacing between plants depends on the type of mum being planted. For example, cushion mums may grow to 30 inches in diameter, while smaller varieties may not need over one square foot of space. Most of the garden types do well when spaced about 18 inches apart. Rows should be about 14 inches apart.

If you added granular fertilizer to the soil when you planted your mums in the spring, you might make one or two applications of water soluble fertilizer (such as Miracle Gro) over the summer. If your mums are older than one year, apply water soluble fertilizer once a month throughout the growing season.

Pinching the top out of the plants periodically helps increase branching and maintain bushier plants, but stop about mid-July. Plants can be dug and divided when the new growth appears in the spring.

Common chrysanthemum problems are verticillium wilt, septoria leaf spot, powdery mildew, aphids, leafhoppers, leafminers and spider mites. Buying healthy plants and planting them in a sunny location with good drainage and air

circulation, and keeping the garden free of weeds and other diseased plants helps to reduce these problems.

Sometimes mums will not bloom as expected. Some possible reasons are not enough sun; improper fertilizing; improper watering; pinching too late; root competition; especially hot weather late in the summer; unusually cold weather in late August and September; and insect or disease damage.

For more information on mums or answers to any other gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.