



October's Flower

Our planet is spiraling ever downward into autumn. The signs are everywhere: in the ever-lengthening shadows of ever-shortening days; in the crystal clarity of the air, finally freed of summer's humidity; in the rangy overgrowth of exhausted annuals. The leaves are still green, mostly, but already the rain is enough to leave some strewn across the slick roads. In the morning I have to put on a sweater.

Still, on sunny afternoons, I can almost convince myself summer lingers. Almost, but not quite, because one clue is inescapable: October announces itself, everywhere, with chrysanthemums. Suddenly, every garden center, grocery store, hardware store, and roadside stand is selling them, while every front porch shows off a pot or two, often next to a fat pumpkin. Chrysanthemums are the most widely grown potted plant in this country.

Mums were first recorded in China in the 15th century B.C, and became popular somewhat later (8th century A.D.) in Japan. Both countries adopted the flower as a symbol of royalty, though the mum as depicted then was a single yellow daisy-type flower, not the fluffy beauties we see today. By the 17th century mums had arrived in Europe, where the Swedish botanist Linnaeus gave them their new Latinized name: "chrysos" for "gold" and "anthemum" for "flower." Early colonists brought the plant with them to the Americas.

Since then, mums have been hybridized into a huge variety of shapes, sizes and colors. You can buy 6"-wide "football" mums, a favorite corsage for college football game dates in dressier times (think raccoon coats); exotic spider types; or tiny pompoms. By far the most familiar varieties are two or three inches across, with multiple rows of petals, grown in a tight dome solidly paved with flowers. The look is achieved by repeatedly pinching back the stems throughout the summer in order to force the plant to branch and re-branch, tripling the number of blooms. Then, since mums won't bloom until the hours of daylight shorten, greenhouses are darkened for carefully calculated periods. Thanks to this characteristic photosensitivity, bloom time can be planned almost to the day.

Are mums annuals or perennials? The pots you bring home every October are florist mums, which technically may be perennial but behave more like annuals. Check the foliage: that of florist mums tends to be smaller than the wide serrated leaves of garden mums. Conversely, garden mum flowers tend to be a bit smaller than florist mums. If you want to try to grow this year's potted plant outdoors, your best bet is to keep it inside for the winter and plant it out next spring. There just isn't enough time to establish a root system before the ground freezes.

But you're more likely to succeed if you choose garden varieties from the start. They're hardier and better adapted to outdoor growing conditions. Plant in the spring, in full sun, fertilize in July, and pinch back for full, many-flowered stems. Even with the most attentive care, garden mums won't be as tightly covered with blooms as the nursery-grown plants, but that's not a bad thing. Personally, I find their looser habit far more graceful. And since mums are one of the longest-lasting cut flowers, the longer stems of garden varieties are a definite advantage in arrangements. (When buying cut mums, check the foliage, which fades before the flowers. If the leaves are wilted, vase life will be short.)

For pull-out-all-the-stops spectacle, visit one of the many botanical gardens that feature a fall chrysanthemum festival. At the New York Botanical Gardens mums are grown to remarkably consistent sizes and shapes, and then trained over wire forms in geometric or animal shapes. It's like topiary, only in a wide variety of textures and colors. The annual chrysanthemum festival at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania features a 'Plant of a Thousand Blooms.' Astoundingly, one single plant is meticulously pruned, trained, and no doubt force-fed all year long to form a huge umbrella-like dome with over 1,500 precisely spaced, nearly-identical powderpuff blossoms. There's no denying it's a tour de force of skill, patience, and horticultural one-upmanship, but this sort of artificial display isn't nearly as appealing to me as the delicate shell-pink single flowers that spill over my stone steps, partially hidden by self-seeded native asters and the first few fallen maple leaves.

Inexpensive as fall decorations, easy to grow in the garden, long-lasting as cut flowers—what's not to love? And best of all, bringing fresh bright color to the outdoors just as most other flowers are winding down. Time to choose your favorites!