



## **I Want My Mum: A Fall Classic Through the Ages**

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*Orange, purple, and white mums used as "filler" in a potted arrangement at Wickham Park in Manchester, CT. Photo by Abigayle Ward.*

With the arrival of fall, one popular bloom brings the brilliant colors of forest foliage to our doorstep: With flower colors coming in purple, red, orange, yellow, and more, chrysanthemums, or more simply, mums, have been a favorite for centuries. First domesticated in China over 3,000 years ago, mum roots, seedlings, and flower pedals were used as herbal remedies in traditional Chinese medicine.

For nearly 2,000 years, mums have been the symbol of fall in Chinese culture: The Double Ninth Festival, celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, celebrates harvest, ancestors, and the beauty of autumn, with mums taking center stage as both decorations, accessories, and a floral wine.

First introduced to Europeans in the 1600s, mums quickly became a fall favorite. By the mid-1800s, the Victorians had written extensive literature on the interpretation and meaning of the color of each bloom. While some colors have carried the same meaning for thousands of years – such as white blooms symbolizing mourning – others took on entirely different meanings. While in China, a red mum represents fortune and luck, a Victorian would interpret this as a declaration of love.

Luckily, it seems many home gardeners in the United States nowadays are more concerned with the aesthetic appeal of their blooms than the meanings, so major misunderstandings are avoided. With several thousand cultivars available, mums come in many color combinations and growth habits. The National Chrysanthemum Society of the USA recognizes 13 different flower classes, ranging from 6-inch diameter flower balls with many layers of florets to smaller, 2-inch diameter flowers with only a single layer of a few petals. Some mums bloom early, in August, while others will bloom in October.

Further, some mums are annuals regardless of USDA hardiness zone, while others are perennials in zones 5-9. While so-called “florist mums” or “pot mums” are generally grown as annuals and will not survive winter frost, “garden mums” can survive winter frost if planted early enough in the growing season. If you wish to purchase a garden mum, but the mums are unmarked, a good way to tell the difference between florist and garden mums is to check for stolons near the base of the plant. Stolons, also known as “runners”, are shoots that grow out from the base of the mother plant. A daughter plant may have roots growing from the end of a stolon. If you want to purchase a perennial mum, check around the base of the stem for stolons – they will most likely be quite short but are a good sign that the plants may overwinter successfully. Alternatively, if you want to be sure you grow a permanent mum installation that comes back year-after-year, you can start some varieties of hardy garden mums from seed in late winter prior to planting out in spring. Get any mums you want to try overwintering in the ground as soon as possible. You can plant mums next year in spring or summertime to give them plenty of sunny weather to grow hearty root systems prior to the first winter frost of 2025. Mulch around your fall planted mums to help insulate their roots from frost.



*Mums can be found for sale at garden centers starting in late summer. Photo by dmp2024*

Both annual and perennial mums benefit from at least 6 hours of direct sunlight per day. In Connecticut, a sunny spot to the south of your home would be ideal. Water mums thoroughly once the topsoil is dry but try not to wet the leaves or the flowers. Water left on the leaves or flowers can make mums prone to fungal diseases, which can make them unsightly or even kill them in severe cases. Towards the end of the season, especially between October and November, consider leaving the blooms on as long as possible to allow late-season pollinators to collect nectar.

Whether planted in a permanent flower garden or kept in a pot on the porch for fall, mums are an excellent addition of rich fall colors to any home gardener’s flower collection. Consider picking some up this season at your local garden center or plan on purchasing plants or seeds next year.

If you have a question on caring for your mums or for other gardening questions, contact the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, visit their web site at [www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu](http://www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.