PLANT LIFE COLUMN

CHRYSANTHEMUMS

As I walked through the local garden centers this past week, I couldn’t help but notice all the beautiful fall colors filling the shelves. The main attraction - chrysanthemums. Chrysanthemums, or "mums" for short, are definitely the sign that autumn has arrived and cooler weather is not far behind.

Chrysanthemums are one of the most popular and the most colorful of all fall flowering perennials. They are available in a wide selection of varieties and colors, such as white, pink, yellow, lavender, bronze, and salmon. One of the most popular flower types is the single or daisy form. Other flower types include anemone, spoon, spider, decorative and pompon.

Anemone mums have a prominent center of disk florets, which can be described as having a central "pincushion" effect. Spoon mums have spoon shaped petals. Spider petals are long and tubular with hooked ends. Decorative mums have large showy flowers with curved petals. Pompons have small, stiff, almost globular flowers.

These are just a few of the types of mums available. There are hundreds of varieties of garden mums to choose from, but because of the various climatic and soil conditions we find in Florida, not all cultivars perform equally well in all locations. Visiting garden centers, parks and gardens in your vicinity will give you good information on cultivar selection. Selecting the right plant for the right location is important in the success of the life of your chrysanthemum.

Chrysanthemums can be purchased in bloom from garden centers, providing instant fall color for your flowerbeds. When buying potted chrysanthemums, look for healthy, well-shaped plants. Inspect them closely, making sure they are insect and disease free. Look for plants with many flower buds. It is better to buy a plant with many partially opened buds since it will have a longer period of bloom than a plant in full bloom.

Plant your chrysanthemums in well-drained soil. The addition of compost or other suitable organic matter to the planting bed is desirable. Apply a three to four-inch layer of organic matter and 6-6-6 fertilizer as labeled on the package. Till the compost into the soil to a depth of six inches. The plants should be set 18 to 24 apart to provide adequate space for development. Vigorous varieties may need a 30-inch spacing to prevent crowding. Check the plant label to be sure of the proper spacing for your variety.

The chrysanthemums you plant this fall will carry over the winter and resume growing in the spring. During this time, they will grow in diameter. The clumps of plants should be divided periodically to prevent the flower stems in the clump from becoming too crowded. By not dividing the clumps will cause weak, spindly growth with few flowers. Propagating your mums will give you more plants to add to your landscape and keep you mums growing healthy.

To propagate your mums, select strong-growing clumps that seem to be overcrowded. Separate the individual shoots with an adequate root system, so the new small plant can become reestablished quickly, and plant them in a new location.

After the plants are established and at least six inches tall, pinch off the top one to two inches of the stem. This will encourage the mums to branch out and become bushier plants. When the new branches are six to eight inches long, they too can be pinched. This practice should be continued with the final pinch made between August 1 and 15. If pinched later, the plants may not have sufficient stem length by the time days are short enough for bud formation and flowering in the fall. As the days get shorter in the late summer, flower buds will begin to develop and by next September some varieties should be providing color in your landscape.
So, enjoy your chrysanthemums and their fall colors now and take care of them during the year, so they can bring you the sense of autumn again next year, knowing that the cool weather is just around the corner.

For more information on chrysanthemums or if you have any plant or landscape question, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls on Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm, at (321) 697-3000.

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