



Garden Chrysanthemums

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The garden chrysanthemum is one of the most exciting and colorful flowers that can be grown in the home landscape. It requires a minimum amount of care and does well even under somewhat adverse conditions. There are cultivars (cultivated varieties) with color that can stretch the imagination of most gardeners. With hundreds of cultivars available, the choice of plants to grow is unlimited. To have a more interesting collection of "mums," however, plant cultivars of various types--such as singles, anemones, decoratives, pompons, spoons, spiders, and standards.

In our area, garden chrysanthemums are planted most frequently in the fall. Most of the plants are sold in pots, which may either be left on, if they are the kind that break down, or else removed before planting. The plants generally have had a least one pinch, which results in a well-branched plant.

The site for planting should be well drained and receive plenty of sunlight. The plants should be spaced 18 to 24 inches apart, and some of the more vigorous cultivars may need 30 to 36 inches. Enough space should be allowed so the plants can develop to their maximum. Plant to the same depth they were growing in their pots or containers and no deeper. The plants should be watered in thoroughly after planting.

The garden chrysanthemum in most instances should be considered an annual flower. Therefore, when frost kills the tops of the plants, these dead stems are cut off and removed from the garden. Nothing else is done and if the plants live over the winter and come up next spring, fine. If they don't, then buy some new ones next fall. UVM research in South Burlington (USDA zone 4/5) on dozens of varieties has shown many to live at least one winter, but none to overwinter consistently year to year. However, many growers prefer to try to keep them over and, therefore, cut off the dead tops and cover the plants with mulch to a depth of three to four inches. The plants can be dug after frost and healed in a cold frame, if one is available.

For those overwintered successfully, fertilizing the plants will develop good green foliage with optimum flowering. Apply a complete fertilizer such as 4-16-16, 5-10-5, 5-10-10, or 5-20-20 at the rate of 3 to 4 pounds per square feet of bed area. An application of fertilizer should be made monthly during the growing season. The fertilizer should be watered in after it is applied. Soluble fertilizers are also quite satisfactory to use if desired. Follow the rate of application on the package or container. As the plants grow, they should be pinched so as to produce more compact plants with more flowers. If this isn't done, the plants will become too tall and leggy. Also, if the plants become quite tall, light will be excluded from the lower part of the plants resulting in unsightly dead leaves.

New shoots should have the tips removed by pinching them off between the thumb and forefinger. This practice should be followed, leaving two or three leaves on the shoot, whenever it becomes 3 to 4 inches long. This practice can be timed so that the fertilizing and pinching can be done the same day and it will usually work out to be once a month; however, with most garden cultivars, the last pinch should be made no later than July 1. If pinching is continued after this date, flower buds will be eliminated from the plants.

Weeds, as with many other plants, may present a problem with growing garden chrysanthemums. These can be removed by hand or an organic mulch could be used at the time of planting. Materials such as shredded bark, wood chips, coarse peat moss, or straw will do a good job of keeping the weeds down and conserving moisture

in the soil if applied about 2 inches deep. For those organic materials that break down rather rapidly such as sawdust, an extra application of fertilizer will be needed on the plants. Apply this fertilizer in addition to that which is applied for the plants. However, you will only need it a couple of times and then stop.

Other methods of weed control are the use of chemicals and inorganic mulches. Such pre-emergence chemicals can be very effective if applied early before weeds appear. Plastic films are also quite effective as are hard mulches such as decorative gravel, stones, marble chips, and similar materials.

One of the very important cultural practices with garden chrysanthemums is adequate amounts of water. During some summers rainfall may be plentiful enough to eliminate most additional watering. However, when the soil starts to get dry the plants should be watered. Applying enough water at a time to soak the soil to a depth of 4 to 6 inches is necessary. This is best done by using soaker hoses, or hand watering if just a few plants. It is better to apply the water during the day so the foliage will dry off before nightfall. Otherwise, leaf and flower diseases can become a problem.

Fortunately for garden chrysanthemum growers, most insect and disease problems are controllable. The common insect pests are aphids and red or two-spotted mites, which can usually be controlled by spraying with an insecticidal soap or insecticide. Mildew can become a problem in late summer and fall and can be controlled with sulfur. Most other fungus diseases can be kept in check by using fungicides. One disease that cannot be controlled is verticillium wilt. Discard infected plants and plant resistant cultivars.

(Adapted from James L. Caldwell, The Ohio State University)