

Yard and Garden – 10-22-2011- Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

When I was a young lad, if I told someone a secret, I would then say, *Mum's the word*. Then that saying meant keep quiet; don't say anything. Later in life, during my teenage years, that phrase changed to *Mum's the word; keep it under your arm*. By then, mum had nothing to do with keeping quiet; rather it became an expression for good hygiene. In the early 1900's the word mum was the trade name given for the first underarm, cream deodorant sold in the United States. *Mum's the word, keep it under your arm* was their advertising catch phrase. Rarely are those two sayings used today; but at this moment in the world of gardening, mum truly is the word.

Most gardeners use the word mum shortened for the word chrysanthemum. Chrysanthemum is the scientific genus name for a large group of popular flowering perennials, most of which bloom in autumn. At this time of year, when most other flowering plants become rag-tag in appearance, the breathtaking beauty of mums rushes to the forefront. For the past week, I have been dashing about town with my camera in hand, photographing and admiring the spectacular floral display of brightly blooming mums.



Mums exist in a wide variety of colors including yellow, bronze, lavender, white, red, and gold. They are also classified by flower form, such as spider mum, anemone mum, pompon mum, football mum, spoon mum and cushion mum. When selecting which to plant in the garden look for two distinguishing names. In the past hardy versus non-hardy was widely used. Today, I encourage gardeners to look for the names garden mum versus florist mum. Those labeled garden mums will generally survive in central Nebraska year after year; whereas, those labeled florist mum may do well as an annual but will rarely survive our winters.



Interestingly, although we now commonly see potted mum plants for sale, it is best to plant mums in the spring of the year. If one recently purchased a potted garden mum for the yard, I suggest planting it as quickly as possible in order for the plant to become well rooted before the ground freezes. Even then, for added protection and to ensure its survival, add an inch or two of mulch after the ground freezes.

The sight for planting mums should be well drained and receive plenty of sunshine. Depending on the cultivar, mum plants can grow from one foot in height to as much as three feet in height and width. (Notice the photo of the beautiful mum plant



where I placed a yardstick to give you a feel for size.) Mums look best when planted in mass. Individual plants should be placed at the same depth they were growing in the flowerpot and spaced 18 to 24 inches apart. The more vigorous cultivars should be spaced 30 to 36 inches apart. Water thoroughly after planting and continue to provide supplemental watering throughout the growing season. Adding an all-purpose, water-soluble fertilizer every three to

four weeks adds to the vigor of the plant.



Mum plants maintain a bushy compact form if pinched or pruned regularly. If this is not done, the plants all too often become tall and leggy. When new shoots reach four to six inches in length, pinch back leaving two or three leaves on the shoot. Continue pinching thereafter every 3 to 4 weeks from May through July 15th. If pinching is continued after this

date, flower buds may not have enough time to develop and bloom before frost destroys them.

Lastly, to prevent overcrowding, mums benefit by dividing about every three to five years. Being aware of this management practice is a great way for one to increase plants in the landscape. If you notice a beautiful mum plant blooming in someone else's yard, let them know

that next spring you would be most receptive to any divisions they might be willing to share. Perhaps good fortune will come your way.

As I began, *Mum's the word*. Although a secret when shared should remain a secret and the use of an underarm deodorant is a wise choice for keeping friends, Chrysanthemum is the mum word for today. While beautiful autumn weather abounds, take time to enjoy the magnificent splendor of flowering mums. Sadly they, like all other flowers, will soon succumb to the chilling nip of Jack Frost.

