

What to do With Those Mums

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There are several popular fall plants and one of those is the mum. Mums grow in nice, rounded forms and reliably produce flowers in the whites, reds, oranges, yellows, pinks, and purples with little to moderate help from the gardener. With the right mum variety selection and proper care, some mums can become permanent residents of your garden.

There are two main categories of mums; “florist” and “garden” mums. Florist mums aren't winter hardy but are quite spectacular with dense flowers, compact growth habits, and are favored for putting in fall pots. With our recent weather any floral mums would've fatally bit the dust already if they were left outside. Garden mums also have wilted by now but the difference between the two types of mum is the florist's mum is dead while the garden mum probably isn't.

So instead of throwing away a perfectly healthy garden mum, your first inclination is probably to plant it. Well, don't, or at least not yet anyway! There's a relatively easy process to follow that will get the garden mum ready for planting when the proper time comes. But I think it's easier to understand what mums don't like which then says to avoid planting them in the fall.

The one thing that kills more garden mums than anything else is poor drainage or roots that are constantly wet. Consider the ground right now which is fairly representative of average for this time of year. We've had some light precipitation, day time temps are somewhat cool, night time temps are consistently below freezing, and all trees, shrubs, and other plants have dropped most if not all of their leaves so consequently their water use is very reduced resulting in high soil moisture. See the problem?

So instead of planting now, plant in the spring so their roots can become well established by the fall and get them through next year's winter. But to get these plants to spring they need to overwinter this year first. To do that, replot them into larger containers - from a gallon container go to a 3 or even 5 gallon container and keep them outside and watered until late November. Then put them in a unheated garage or sheltered area for the winter, giving them about 1 cup of water per month. Come spring take them back outside, trim back the dead stems, and water well. Keep an eye out for green buds coming from the extreme base of the stems or the ground around the stems indicating they've made it through winter and are ready to be planted in the ground. Choose a full sun site that has good drainage. Alternatively the mums can be left in the pot getting ready for your fall colors.

In addition to liking full sun and good drainage, garden mums like periodic liquid fertilizations spread throughout the growing season or a single top dressed slow-release fertilizer in mid-spring. Pinch them back a couple of times up to July 4th to keep them more compact and come fall you'll have a beautifully blooming plant in the fall.

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