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GARDEN NOTES

MUM IS ALWAYS THE WORD FOR FALL

By Dennis Hinkamp

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The best known fall blooming perennial is probably the chrysanthemum, or "mum" because it is much easier to say and spell.

Mums do quite well in the Intermountain area, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension Specialist, and they are one of the bright spots in the fall in an otherwise drab perennial planting. They tend to perform best when the autumn weather is warm and long and generally hold their fall blooms until the first hard freeze.

Increased interest and breeding has encouraged the production of mums in every color except a true blue, Goodspeed says. They are available in varied heights and blossom sizes, making it possible to design mums into about any landscape.

Technically, there are a number of different types of chrysanthemums, he explains. For simplicity, though, they can be divided into two classes. Garden mums are sold, and intended to be grown only in the garden. Floral mums are forced in a greenhouse and used to brighten the inside of homes as part of a onetime decoration.

Most floral mums will not perform well in the garden because they have been bred and designed to bloom once when forced and then discarded, Goodspeed says. However, because it is so difficult to throw any living plant or flower away, many end up in the landscape.

"They will grow there, and some even thrive," he says. "The problem is the care required to keep them looking good. Many become tall and lanky, requiring them to be pinched and staked so they do not fall and look messy."

Even garden mums need some extra care to keep them looking presentable, he adds. To increase stem growth and reduce the leggy look, most mums are pinched back two to three times prior to June 15. Pinching a mum is done by removing about a third of the new growth back to a bud. This stimulates the plant to branch more, and increases the plants width and flowering wood.

Another term often associated with mums is disbudding, Goodspeed says.

"I once judged a competition where the contestants were given a potted floral mum and asked to properly disbud the plant. One came back with all the flower buds removed. This is a

little extreme. It is really hard to get a plant to bloom when all the flower buds have been removed."

Disbudding is the process of removing some of the buds to allow those left to produce large flowers, he explains. Normally the first buds that appear on a stem are the ones left when disbudding. The small lateral buds can be removed to allow the crown bud to flower. Doing this is not necessary on garden mums. They flower and look great without any disbudding. Only a devout hobbyist takes the time to disbud garden mums.

Like most plants, mums like a well-drained soil, Goodspeed says. Feed them with an all-purpose fertilizer in the spring as growth starts, and again in midsummer as the flowers start to form. Water them deeply and infrequently.

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