

Lan Su Garden Plant Talks
Chrysanthemum 菊花 (júhuā)

Elizabeth Cha Smith (10/20/2017)

“If you want be happy for a lifetime, grow chrysanthemums.”
- Chinese proverb

Chrysanthemums in Our Garden: A Gentleman’s Flower

This time of year, as summer flowers are fading and as we feel the chill in the air, it is delightful to see so many lovely chrysanthemums (mums) throughout our Garden. Because Lan Su Yuan is a scholar’s garden, we can enjoy the beauty and unique fragrance of mum flowers while also appreciating how they have inspired Chinese poets and philosophers for millennia.

In Chinese culture, mums are known as one of Four Gentlemen Flowers alongside the orchid, flowering plum, and bamboo. Traditionally, Chinese gentlemen and scholars admired and got inspiration from mums because they are capable of blooming in the chilly fall in harsh conditions which takes courage and fortitude. So mums have inspired gentlemen and scholars to have moral courage within themselves to withstand unethical situations and to live honorably.

Because chrysanthemums are such an important part of the Double Ninth Festival, also known as the Chongyang Festival, we are grateful that our Garden will have over 600 potted mums (118 cultivars) for the fall season. The Festival (which the Garden will be celebrating on November 3) falls on the ninth day of the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar. Without Mandi’s total dedication to the hundreds of potted mums, we wouldn’t have these flowers to brighten our garden in autumn. When it comes to the fall season, there is no flower that connects us to Chinese culture more than chrysanthemums.

Chrysanthemums in Chinese Culture: The Flower of the Ninth Moon

Traditionally, Chinese people have known fall has arrived when they have started to see bright yellow mums in the market that symbolize vitality and longevity. Chinese herbal doctors promote mum tea and mum wine for robust health and perhaps even immortality. Some Chinese also eat parts of some species of mums as boiled or steamed vegetables. There is even a story about how Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) personally participated in pinching off the leaves and buds of mums in the Summer Palace for bigger flower heads. The chrysanthemum below is called, ‘King’s Pleasure’ because the rich yellow color symbolizes imperial power and prosperity.



The recorded history tells us that the Chinese have grown chrysanthemums since the early Han period (206 BC-220 AD) and have celebrated the Chongyang festival for millennia. According to legend, this festival started after a young man named Hengjing saved his village from a threatening river monster.

After the monster balked at the fragrances of dogwood sticks and mum wine, the young man battled him in a sword fight while sending villagers to higher ground for safety.

The Chongyang (Double Nine) festival focuses on celebrating good health and warding off evil spirits. The number 9 possesses strong qi, but doubling 9 can be inauspicious and 'too much of a good thing'. So families and friends will walk and hike in mountain areas for health and to avoid any evil spirits at home. Families will also visit elderly relatives, eat Chongyang cake (sometimes called Chrysanthemum cake), drink chrysanthemum wine for longevity, and enjoy chrysanthemum displays and competitions (like a famous one today hosted by the city of Xiaolan in Guangdong province). Families also show filial piety by visiting ancestor tombs, mending the markers, burning incense sticks, and offering fresh food and fruits (persimmons) to deceased ancestors. Afterward, families will share the good food and mum wine while they reminisce about family sagas and hope for prosperity and longevity in the coming year.

Botany

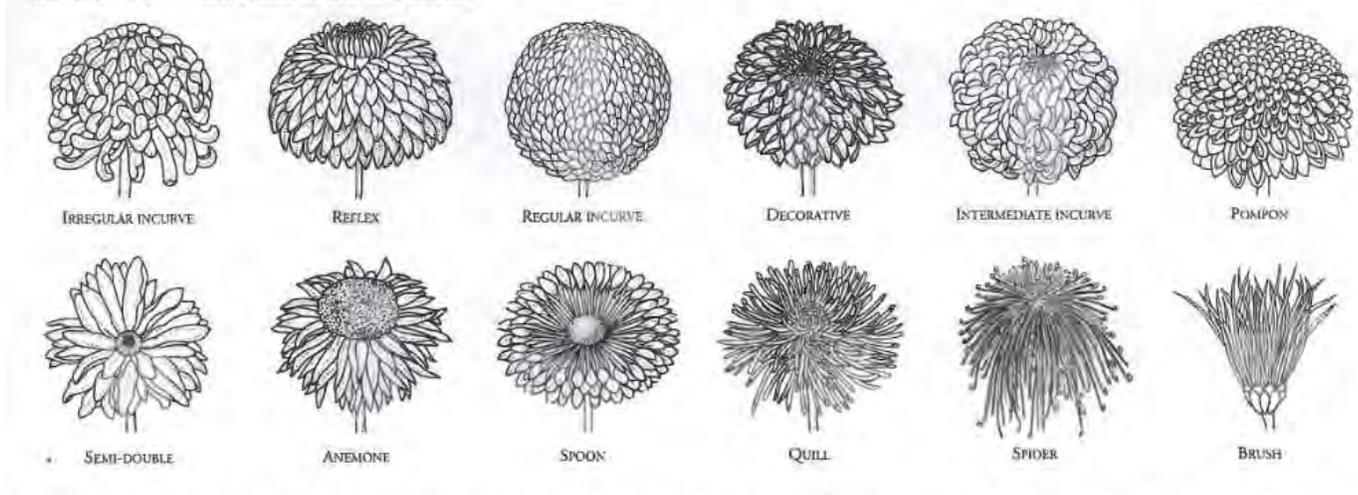
Chrysanthemums belong to the Asteraceae family and are in the same genus as dahlia, sunflowers, marigolds, zinnias, and cosmos. The flower was named in the mid-18th century by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) from the Greek for gold, *chrysos*, and *antheon*, flower. The International Code of Botanical Nomenclature officially classified it as *Chrysanthemum indica* in 1999. Species *Indica* was used by early botanists to describe plants from India and other parts of the Far East.

Chrysanthemum flowers are not a single flower but a compositae of numerous tiny florets. On a single chrysanthemum head one could find countless individual florets, including some that appear to be petals. Unlike most flowers that need longer day hours to bloom, mums are "short-day" flowers that require longer night hours to trigger the buds to bloom.



Mums are divided into two major classes: The Garden Hardy and the Exhibition type. The Exhibition type is grown for the purpose of showing at exhibitions and need stakes to hold up their heads while the Garden varieties do not need any staking. The Exhibit flowers are divided into 13 different flower head shapes with standards that are set by the U.S. National Chrysanthemum Society (see below). (In our garden, Mandi has prepared a laminated mum guide with 10 pages of Exhibition type flowers.) These flower heads consist of two types of florets: disc florets and ray florets (see above). The disc florets are in the center of the flowerhead with the male and female reproductive organs. Ray florets look like petals extending out from the disc center.

CHRYSANTHEMUM FLOWERHEAD FORMS



Cultivation

Potted chrysanthemum can last three to six weeks, but high temperatures and lack of water will shorten the flowering period. One can start the seedlings in pots with seeds or cuttings six weeks before the first frost hits. They need good soil, full sun, good air circulation, water, and fertilizer once a month until July. Pinching off flower leaves and buds is an important part of the growing Exhibition style mums.

In the supermarket today, you will mostly see Garden Hardy type mums in pots which are mostly pest and disease free. However, if you see yellowed leaves you should replot the plant with a mixture of sand and peat moss for better drainage. The yellowness could also mean the presence of aphids on stem tips or buds, which you can pinch off and throw away. The natural insecticide, pyrethrum, can be made from the dried flower heads of two species, *Chrysanthemum cinerariifolium* and *Chrysanthemum coccineum*, and is toxic to soft bodied insects such as aphids and beetles,

Conclusion

The following poem, "Drinking Wine", was written by poet Tao Qian or Tao Yuanming (c. 365-427), who popularized the cultivation of mums and whose poems are often quoted in Chinese garden literature.

Autumn chrysanthemums have beautiful colors,
With dew in my clothes I pluck their flowers,
I float this thing in wine to forget my sorrow,
To leave far behind my thoughts of the world,
Alone, I pour myself a goblet of wine;
When the cup is empty, the pot pours for itself,
As the sun sets, all activities cease;
Homing birds, they hurry to the woods, singing.
Haughtily, I whistle below the eastern balcony -
I've found again the meaning of life.

We should all enjoy this poem and let it remind us that all troubles, private or official, might be diminished by enjoying chrysanthemums this autumn and drinking mum wine!