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Mum's The Word

Right now, mum is the word on everyone's lips and on every shelf at retailers right now. The most iconic fall flowering plant has arrived at stores and nurseries, but what happens when it comes home? How will they fare, and will they overwinter?

Chrysanthemums, the full name of mums, are a lovely flowering plant that show up in different ways. The colorful globe mums that we love during fall are a far cry from other forms of chrysanthemum. There are single-stem varieties with much larger and more open blooms, and also perfectly round pompom blooms. Colors can range anywhere between white, red, yellow, and also into purple and green.

No matter how they are shaped or colored, chrysanthemums tend to set blooms in fall, with some varieties flowering early. Despite their need for short days, the mums that are blooming in stores are likely manipulated to bloom a bit earlier than naturally. Along with this, mums grow most vigorously in spring and summer. This leads to the question: Will a store-bought mum overwinter in our part of Kansas? The answer is a firm maybe.

There are some mum cultivars that are hardier, but planting a mum after Halloween doesn't bode well. When planting a perennial in the fall, earlier is always better. The time when mums hit stores and come home is very close to the first fall frost and freeze dates, which are mid and late October, respectively.

Along with the weather, those mums are in full bloom and have more important biological needs than roots! The fact that the plant is pouring energy into flowers (preferably a lot of them) and the cold is fast approaching, their survival isn't guaranteed. Some things can be done to help encourage them to take root.

Selecting a healthy mum with a good root system is a great start. Next, digging a large hole and incorporating plenty of organic matter like peat or compost can start it on the right foot for spring. The unfortunate next step is potentially trimming flowers and flower buds to direct energy away downwards. This can be done after a nice initial flush of color, for those good fall aesthetics. Lastly, mulching may be a lifesaver for the plant.

Mulching with a few inches of light, airy materials like straw and leaf debris will help insulate

the small fibrous root system. Along with mulch, leaving the top of the plant after it has withered can help provide protection. One of the biggest concerns for a mum over the winter, apart from rooting and freezing, is moisture. The roots shouldn't remain wet for too long, but they may also need a drink on a warm day if it has been dry.

Whether the mum is bought for gardening or decoration, it can still be enjoyed this fall. Just know that it needs all the help it can get to survive winter. Otherwise, try planting in spring for fall blooms, and treat the ones from the store as an annual.

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