

# How to Grow Hardy Mums

Not to be mistaken for fall's potted domes, hardy mum varieties are meant to go right in the ground. They have a graceful growth habit and withstand frost to come back year after year.

By **Marty Ross**



Chrysanthemums Shown: **1.** 'Firedance Igloo' **2.** 'Harvest Igloo' **3.** 'Hannah's Double White' **4.** 'Five Alarm Red' **5.** 'Pumpkin Igloo' **6.** 'Old Double Pink' **7.** 'Dainty Pink Igloo' **8.** 'Sundance Igloo' **9.** 'Frosty Igloo' **10.** 'Sheffield Pink' **11.** 'Sizzling Igloo' **12.** 'Snowy Igloo'

CARSON DOWNING

Mums are most often thought of as seasonal potted plants, something to place on the porch to celebrate fall. But once the flowers fade, the plants wind up in the compost bin. Hardy mums (also known as garden mums) like the Igloo varieties and 'Sheffield Pink', however, are tough enough to survive winters as far north as Zone 4 and have a loose, romantic growth habit that looks right at home in a planting bed. Put the plants in the ground now, and with the right care throughout the year, they'll put on a colorful performance each autumn. Generally, mums bloom from September through November—when the days grow shorter—and stay vibrant for weeks.

## Planting Hardy Mums in the Fall

Plant hardy mums in late summer to early fall—basically, as soon as you see them in garden centers—to give roots a chance to establish before the ground freezes. Loosen the soil around their roots with your fingers, and plant in well-drained soil in a sunny spot. Hardy mums also prefer a soil pH slightly on the alkaline side,

so performing a soil test will help you determine where to site your mums. Once planted, water once a week through fall. Let the faded flowers and foliage remain on through winter. (Removing them may stimulate new growth that wouldn't survive winter.)

## **Winter Care for Hardy Mums**

As soon as the first hard frost passes, it's time to prepare your mums for winter. Snip stems to 3-4 inches above the ground. Protect plant's roots from freezing temperatures with a thick layer of straw or shredded hardwood as mulch around the plant base. Doing so will insulate the soil around the plants, ensuring that it will remain a constant temperature instead of freezing and thawing, only to freeze again.

If you get your batch of mums later in the fall season, it might be too late to plant them. That, or winters in your climate may be too cold for mums to keep enjoy (they prefer Hardiness Zone 5 and up). Fear not: You can overwinter your mums indoors. Water the plants well and place in a cool dark area, like a basement or closet. From there, they'll only need to be water about once a week. The mums will eventually "hibernate" and be comfortable in these conditions until spring.

## **Spring Mum Pruning**

After all chance of frost has passed, prune off last year's stems at soil level. Remove mulch around plants and replace with a 10-10-10 fertilizer. While the plants are in limbo before they start blooming again, be sure to keep soil moderately moist and be sure that the bed stays weed-free.

If you had to stow away your mums indoors for the winter, gradually start exposing your plant to light before fully committing it to its place in the ground.

## **Caring for Hardy Mums in the Summer**

Cut mums back to about half their height—go ahead, use hedge shears—around the Fourth of July to prevent them from getting lanky and flopping over. If you've planted one of the Igloo series, wait until after its first bloom to trim, then enjoy its second bloom in the fall. Supplement plant with a water-soluble fertilizer to encourage strong branching and bud formation.

## **Hardy Mums Long-term Care**

Every few years, you'll need to divide your hardy mums to keep them healthy and vigorous. As soon as the last hard frost passes, use a clean spade to dig up your established plant after new growth has emerged. Use the spade to separate all clusters of the plant, separating the vigorous pieces first. Replant your new divisions in a fresh bed.