

Flower of the Week: Agapanthus

Nothing can be more refreshing to the eyes on hot summer days than a visual highlight in cool colors.

When you walk past yards and gardens and catch sight of clusters of lovely agapanthus in blue or light purple, you can practically feel a breeze of coolness take the heat away.



An emblem of "striking love," agapanthus has small, exquisite umbrella-type blooms gathered in plump, lively bundles.

Parks and yards are made pretty with its presence, and it can also add joyful decorative delight to your home when you bring potted agapanthus home.

A Lily in Name But not Truly a Lily

Agapanthus originates from Southern Africa. Its genus name, *Agapanthus*, means "flowers of love" in Greek. It is also called names like "Blue Lily," "African Lily," "Lily of the Nile", *etc.*



Despite its resemblance to a small-sized lily and historical classification in the Liliaceae family (due to its appearance and how its ovary is formed), agapanthus is not truly a lily.

Now, with a genetic examination and new rules of classification, it has been re-classified to the Amaryllidaceae family.



Although agapanthus is not a lily, its flower language still says "love strikes," and you can still give this flower to the one you love.

Places of Interest

Agapanthus is hugely popular in Australia. If you'd like to see a continuous sea of beautiful blue-violet flowers, visit Australia in the summer (keep in mind summer there is the wintertime of the Northern hemisphere). The Royal Botanic Garden in Sydney and Stanley, Tasmania, are two scenic spots worth recommending.



The Royal Botanic Garden in Sydney is a large arboretum located in downtown Sydney. Founded in 1816, it is Australia's oldest scientific research institution and one of the world's most important research facilities for historical plants, with over 20,000 plant species in its collection.

Take a stroll in the Southern African Garden, and a profusion of blue-violet agapanthus will welcome you with gorgeous blossoms waving in the breeze - a lovely sight.



If you don't feel like going to the tourist-packed arboretum, a vacation in the township of Stanley may be another choice.

Take a walk along the seashore, and a long belt of blooming agapanthus in front of beach houses and cottages on the hillsides will catch your eyes. Ageless white, tranquil blue, and mysterious purple, they swing and dance in the wind with a peaceful appeal.

For a moment, you can let go of the hustle and flow of the city, embrace the green ocean and blue sky, get footloose on the beach for a relaxed run, and imagine you've entered into a dreamland only fairy tales can offer.

Claude Monet's Agapanthus

Claude Monet, the master French artist of Impressionism, owned a small beautiful garden in his later years. Besides the well-known water lilies, Monet also planted plenty of agapanthus in his garden.



Between 1914 to 1926, Monet painted a piece titled "Agapanthus" that is considered one of the most famous works of the last stage of his artistic career.

Agapanthus is called the "flower of love" in Southern Africa, and just as its flower language suggests, Monet lived with his wife and children in his twilight years and expressed a great love to his beloved ones through his tenacious will to stay vital.



Agapanthus (circa 1914 - circa 1926) Claude Monet

The dynamic movement of agapanthus in the wind is artistically captured with blue-violet brushes, displaying Monet's beautiful visions for romantic and family love. Yet, the omnipresent cyan tone sets a timeless sense of melancholy to the art piece, making one immediately sympathize with the master in old age.

Can I Grow Agapanthus Well?

Agapanthus is strongly vital. Wild agapanthus can survive in barren soils. To enjoy the blue-violet sight at home, you don't need to invest a lot of time or work; just meet its needs for proper light, soil, and water conditions, and it will flourish.



Agapanthus likes ample sunlight. In winter and spring, make sure it gets sufficient light duration, while in summer, it needs some shade and good ventilation.

Agapanthus likes humus-rich soil with good drainage. Watering it once a day in summer and once a month in winter will suffice.

It generally doesn't need pruning. Just remove the dried leaves from the plant's base from time to time, and deadhead the spent flowers after blooming.

Size: 1.6-3.2 ft (50-100 cm) tall

Hardiness: USDA Hardiness Zones 8-11

Light Duration: Full light to half shade

Soil: Fertile, moist, with good drainage

Blooming Time: Summer

Flower of the Week: Bigleaf Hydrangea

Summary: You Can Decide the Color of this Magnificent Flower. Blue or Pink? You Choose!

Whether it's planted in a garden bed or a patio pot, Bigleaf hydrangea is one of the most spectacular flowering shrubs that you can add to your landscape. With a long blooming season lasting from late spring into fall, and fragrant flowers in shades of blue and pink, *Hydrangea macrophylla* is a great choice for gardens large and small.



While bigleaf Hydrangeas can be challenging to grow successfully, their magnificent blooms make them a favorite of gardeners.

Two Different Forms

The two most common forms of bigleaf hydrangeas are Hortensia and Lacecap.

Hortensias have huge, showy mopheads of blooms, often in stunning shades of blue, and continue blooming throughout the summer and into the fall.



Flower of the hortensias

Lacecaps are more delicate in appearance, the clusters of blooms are flattened, with small flowerets in the middle, surrounded by larger, showier flowers that only last for about a month in summer.



Flower of the lacecaps

The History of Hydrangeas

Originating in the woodlands of Japan, Big Leaf Hydrangeas have been cultivated in that country for close to two thousand years, and have long been one of the most beloved flowers in that country.



Hydrangeas in Kamakura

They were introduced to Europe in the eighteenth century by Carl Peter Thunberg, an employee of the Dutch East India Company, and in the nineteenth century the English plant explorer Charles Maries brought back some more varieties of bigleaf hydrangea from Japan.



Carl Peter Thunberg on a Sweden stamp

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the French were in the grip of a hydrangea craze, and their efforts to breed better hydrangeas led to the popularity of hydrangeas throughout the Western world in the 1900s, with no signs of letting up today.



Hydrangeas in France

France is home to the Shamrock Garden Hydrangea Collection in Normandy, with 5 acres of hydrangeas, and in July and August, the island of Faial in the Azores has thousands of deep-blue hydrangeas in bloom.

Hydrangea Festivals

Hydrangeas feature prominently in Japan's culture, where they are called Ajisai. Annual Ajisai festivals celebrate the blooming season of hydrangeas in June and July, and tea brewed from *Hydrangea serrata* leaves, called "amacha" or "tea from heaven", is customarily drunk on Buddha's birthday on April 8.



Floating hydrangea in Meigetsuin temple, Kanagawa

The Meaning of Hydrangea Blossoms

In its home country of Japan, the blue hydrangea symbolizes deep emotion and contrition. Legend has it that an emperor gave blue hydrangeas to the family of the woman he loved as an apology for neglecting her. Also in Japan, pink hydrangeas are a traditional gift on a fourth wedding anniversary. Meanwhile, in Victorian England, white hydrangea blossoms symbolized arrogance and coldness when given to women who rejected suitors.



The Best Hydrangeas

Hydrangeas are famous for their brilliant blue flowers, which depend on aluminum in acidic soil; otherwise, they revert to shades of pink and cream. There are hundreds of varieties available.

Hydrangea macrophylla 'Glowing Embers' produces red-pink mopheads in summer. *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Penny Mac' has deep blue mopheads from July to October. *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Bailmer' produces magnificent blue mopheads from June through to October; it's very hardy and will bloom on old or new wood, making it a great choice for beginners.



Glowing embers hydrangea

Blue or Pink? You Choose!

One of the most fascinating things about Hydrangeas is that you can alter the color of the blooms by adjusting the soil pH. If you want blue flowers, you need to give your Hydrangea acidic soil full of organic matter, as the soil should be kept moist but well-drained. The other key to blue blooms is aluminum in the soil, which can only be taken up properly when the pH is low. You can add aluminum supplements in either granular or liquid form to encourage brilliant blue blooms.



If you prefer your hydrangeas in shades of pink, you need to raise the pH, which can be done with lime.



Can I Grow Hydrangeas Well?

Hydrangeas require careful siting and soil preparation to get the best blooms possible. These plants originated as understory shrubs in the forests of Japan, so it's best to give them some shade, especially in hot climates. They will thrive with morning sun and afternoon shade. It's also a good idea to avoid a south or west exposure, as the buds might open too early in those warmer spots, thus risking getting nipped by a late spell of cold weather.



Only prune Big Leaf Hydrangeas immediately after their blooms have faded, as most varieties bloom on old wood. Avoid any pruning after August 1, since next year's flower buds form in late summer and fall.



Small varieties of bigleaf hydrangeas are perfectly suited to container cultivation, where you can more easily control the pH of the soil. Larger varieties can be grown as single specimens, or as an informal flowering hedge.



Size: 1-1.5 m (3-6 feet) height and spread

Hardiness: USDA Zone 5-9

Sunlight: Morning sun and afternoon shade

Soil: Moist but well-drained acidic to neutral pH soil

Bloom Time: late spring to fall

Flower of the Week: Cornflower

Summary: How Wonderful these Little Elegant Blue Flowers are!

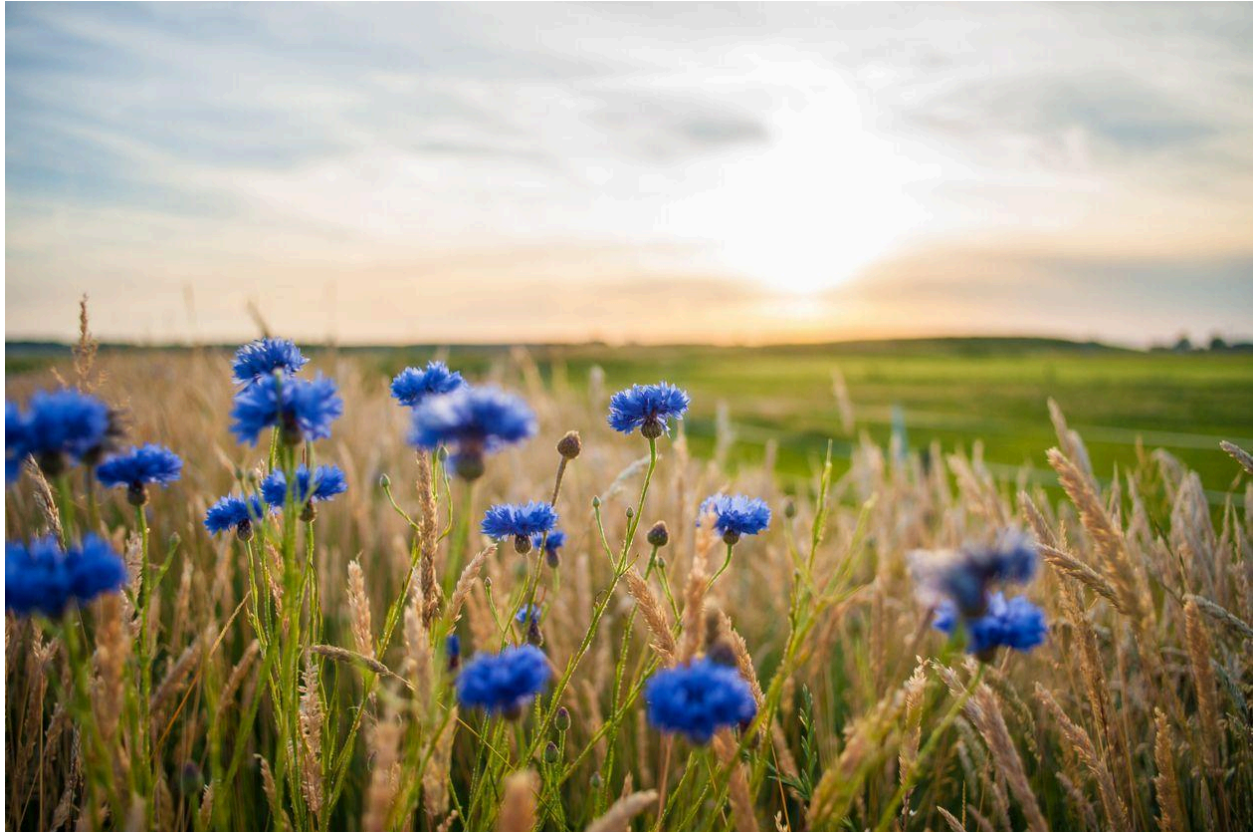
The cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus*) is a fast-growing, lushly-blooming, herbal flower. This slender plant is highly ornamental when it blossoms in the summer and fall. It has a beautiful capitulum - an inflorescence surrounded by a circle of blue trumpet-like ray florets with serrate margin lobes.



Cornflowers are widely useful in horticulture, especially in newly-built gardens. Before other trees, shrubs, and persistent flowers mature to their best looks, this fast-growing country floret comes in handy to revive the dull color void of immature gardens.

From "Cornflower" to "Bachelor's Button"

Cornflowers originated in Europe, where they grow very well in almost all types of environments but especially in arable plain fields with fertile soil. In ancient times, Europeans often found them in the farmlands, thus the earthy name "cornflower".



Cornflowers are great for flower arrangements. They remain vividly-colored when dried, and therefore are often used to make dried flowers. It's said that bachelors in England like to pin them in their buttonholes to boost their courtship success rate, so the cornflower has earned an alternative name of "bachelor's button".

Dried cornflowers are edible. They can be served in salads for adornment. Cornflower petals are often added to Earl Grey tea as well.



A Famous Flower with a Long History

In Europe, the cornflower has a long history of cultivation and enjoys household fame. When tracing the genus name "Centaurea", its written records easily date back to Ancient Greece. According to Pliny the Elder, Ancient Greeks used the name of the mythical Centaurs for these blue florets because they believed the story that Chiron, who mastered the art of healing, had used this plant to cure poisoning by the Hydra.



A Centaurs statue in the Tuileries Garden in Paris

Many regions, schools, organizations, and political parties in Europe also chose the cornflower to be their insignias. Today, it is the national flower of Estonia and Germany. Legend has it that cornflowers once helped Friedrich Wilhelm III of the Kingdom of Prussia and his family hide from Napoleon Bonaparte's pursuing army. Since then, the cornflower has become the symbol of the Kingdom of Prussia, often appearing on the uniforms of high-ranking military officers.

The cornflower is often present in literature and art as well. The story of *The Little Mermaid*, by Hans Christian Anderson, begins with the words "Out in the ocean, where the water is as blue as the prettiest cornflower", describing a beautiful, imaginary underwater world.

The Mesmerizing Blue

Of a cornflower's most attractive features, nothing stands out more than its bright blue color. "Cyanus", the specific epithet in its scientific name, simply means "blue". In the field of design, "cornflower blue" is a unique color name, while in gemology, a higher-level color code of sapphire is also called the "cornflower" color.



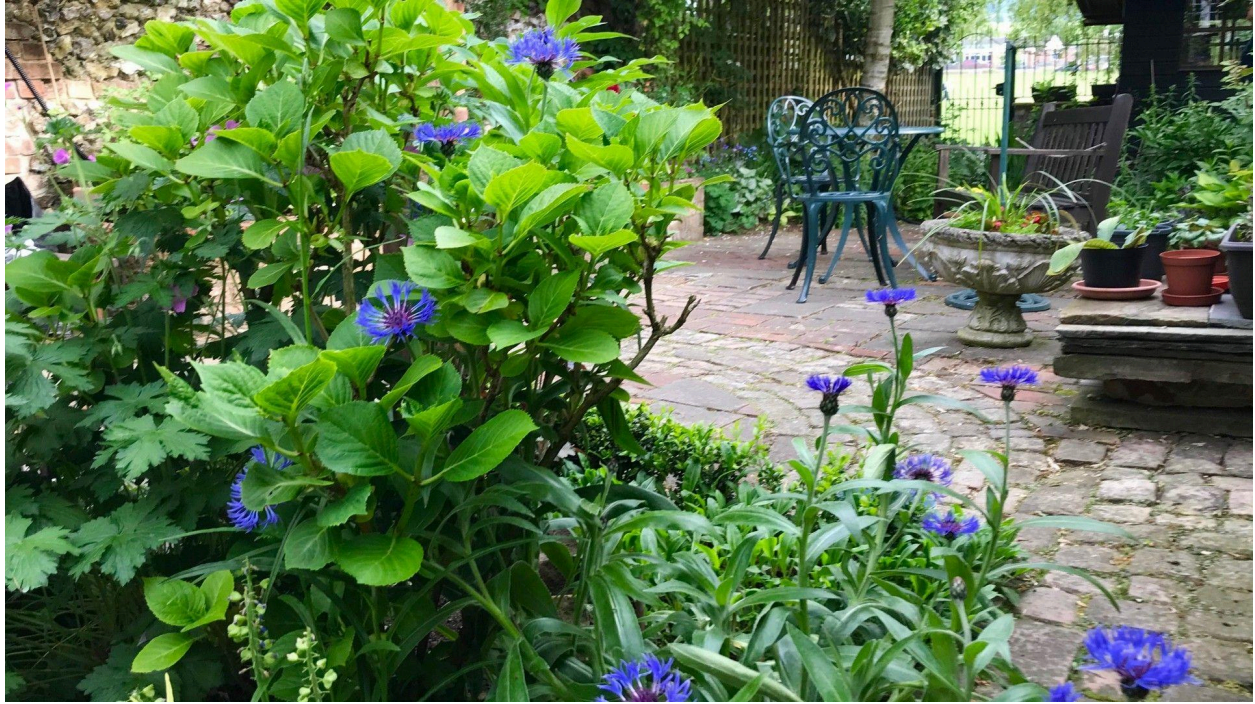
In the 1910s, scientists extracted centaurocyanin, the same kind of anthocyanidin, from cornflowers and roses successively. But a cornflower looks blue, and a rose is red. Why the difference? Initially, people attributed it to the different pH values in the flowers' fine structures, for like all other anthocyanidins, centaurocyanin looks red in an acid environment and blue in an alkaline one. However, later researchers realized the answer is far more complex.



Scientists in Japan discovered the ultimate answer as recently as 2005. The centaurocyanin in cornflowers doesn't bear color by itself. Instead, 6 molecules of anthocyanidins and 6 molecules of flavones constitute an intricate complex protocyanin, with iron and magnesium ions contributing to its formation as well as extra calcium ions to keep it stabilized. It takes such a fully-formed complex to bestow that bright and rich blue upon cornflowers.

Can I Grow Cornflowers Well?

Cornflowers are perfect for country-style gardens, where they can scatter around and grow freely without much special care. Cornflowers require very little from their environments, flourishing naturally and tenaciously no matter whether the soil is barren or fertile, or the sunlight duration long or short. They can also be planted in flower beds or potted in just about any containers.



To create the most striking visual impact, it's best to plant some other flowers among the cornflowers that share the same flowering season while differing vastly in color contrast, such as corn poppies, calendulas, etc. What's more, the cornflower is an excellent nectariferous plant. For a rustic garden, they are the best choice to attract bees and butterflies.



A widely-grown garden plant, cornflowers are superbly capable of expanding. The plant has spread worldwide and naturalized nearly everywhere, including in North America and Australia. In some areas of the New World, it's still considered dangerously invasive. Therefore, take careful measures to prevent its expansion when you grow it.



Interestingly and by contrast, wild cornflower distribution in Europe where the plant originated has reduced significantly due to intensive agriculture and herbicide overdosage.

Size: 30-70 cm tall, up to 1 m tall in fertile soil

Hardiness: USDA Hardiness Zone 2-11

Light duration: full sun, partial shade tolerant

Soil: moist soil with good drainage, drought-tolerant once planted

Bloom time: Late spring through early summer

Flower of the Week: Chrysanthemum

In late fall when everything begins to wither, vibrant chrysanthemums continue to bloom in gardens. This beautiful flower is a perennial herb of Asteraceae. It is native to Asia and Northern Europe, with many diverse varieties originating from China. The rich flower patterns and wonderful colors, as well as the wide application in landscape architecture and cut-flower market, make chrysanthemum the queen of September.

Place of Interest

As the origin of the chrysanthemum, East Asia has a long history of cultivating ornamental varieties of this flower. If you wish to see spectacular chrysanthemum scenery, a trip to East Asia is definitely a good choice.

1. Florist's Daisy, Kasama, Japan

Kasama's Kiku Matsuri is undoubtedly one of the most influential festivals dedicated to celebrating the viewing and blooming of chrysanthemum in Japan. The event dates back to 1890, making it the oldest chrysanthemum festival in the country. Every year from mid-October to late November, 600,000 tourists go to Kasama and visit the Kasama Inari Shrine where 10,000 pots of chrysanthemums are displayed. The shrine is open daily from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm.



There is also a special area where you can pay to see an incredible exhibition of indoor mannequins dressed as important historical figures in Japan. The mannequins are covered in blooming chrysanthemums.

2. The Beijing Chrysanthemum Festival, China

Chrysanthemum is one of four famous traditional flowers in China. The Beijing Chrysanthemum Festival is held in several major parks in Beijing every fall. Beihai Park and the International Flower Port are two of the best spots to see thousands of beautiful chrysanthemum varieties. The famous Chrysanthemum exhibition in Beihai Park has been held more than 20 consecutive times and mainly features Pinzhong Chrysanthemum, Cliff Chrysanthemum, Desk Chrysanthemum, Bonsai Chrysanthemum, and a flower art exhibition. Additionally, chrysanthemum variety competitions also take place throughout the exhibition.



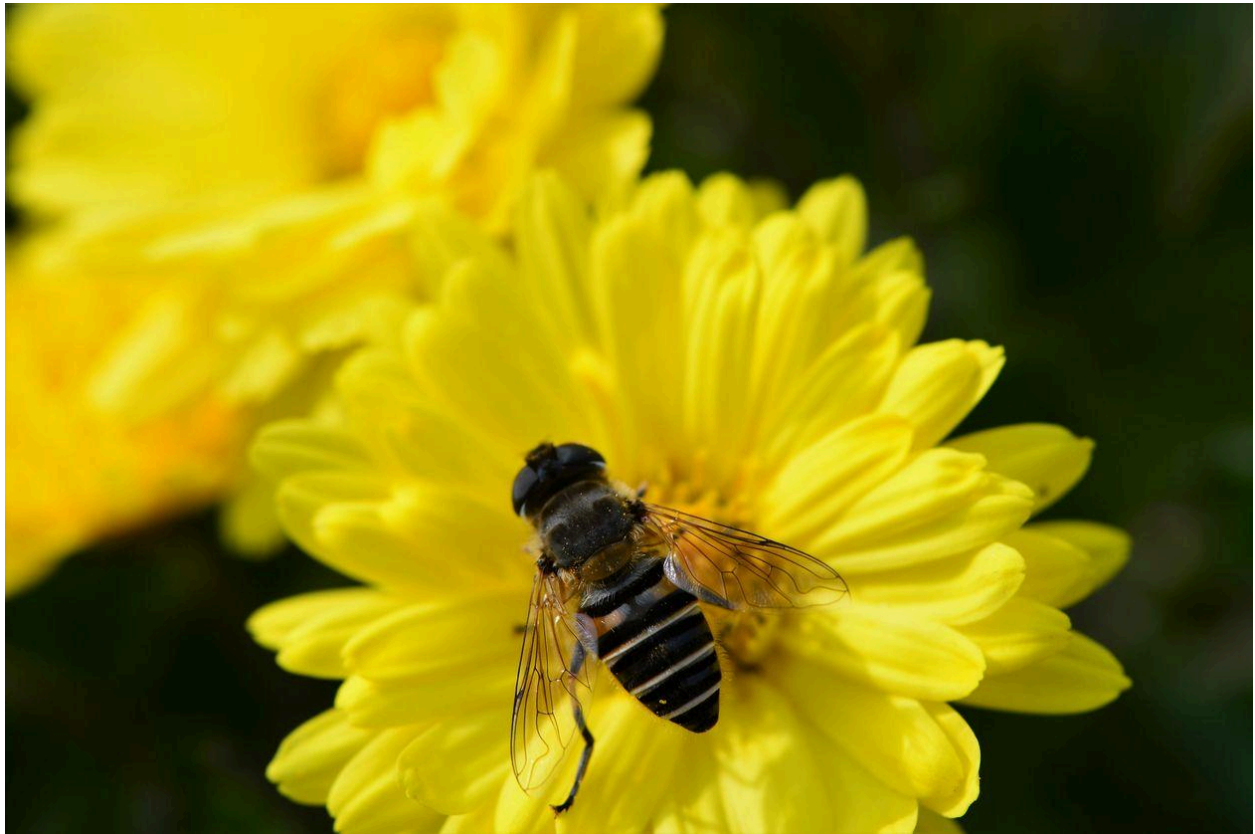
The event takes place from November 1 to 21. One entrance ticket provides the holder access to the entire exhibition. Besides the Chrysanthemum Exhibition, you can also visit other historical parts of Beihai Park.

The wisdom of evolution

The blooming of a chrysanthemum represents fall, but if you think what you see is just a chrysanthemum, you are wrong.

Like other plants in the Chrysanthemum genus, chrysanthemum is a compound flower. This means that the flower head of the chrysanthemum is composed of many independent sessile flowers, including the outer ligules and the central disc florets. The outer ligules are the "petals" we see and

are usually asexual that can't bear fruit. The disc florets in the middle can produce both pollen and fruit, which makes it hermaphroditic.



These small, single florets could be easily missed by insects the plant needs to come by and pollinate. As a result, the chrysanthemum has evolved so that many small florets gather into flower heads to make the florets appear larger. Especially when the outer ligules on the edge open, this makes the flower heads more eye-catching, attracting more insects.

However, with the artificial breeding of chrysanthemum over many years, various varieties have more ligulate florets. More often than not, we can't really spot the central disc florets.

Chrysanthemum in Oriental culture

Most chrysanthemums originated from China, and records of the flower reach as far back as 500 BC. In China, the chrysanthemum has a very deep historical and cultural background. It is a symbol of indifference and seclusion. Oriental hermits who are tired of worldly fame and wealth plant them in their solitary villages. In addition, because chrysanthemum is almost the last blooming flower in fall as it prepares for cold weather, Chinese people also think that it represents the quality of bravery and tenacity.

Chrysanthemum's full blooming season comes at the same time as the season for crabs. There is a custom of eating crabs and enjoying chrysanthemum in the Jiangnan area of China.



Ren Bonian (1840-1896) the painting of drinking with crab claws

Chrysanthemum was introduced into Japan from China in the 8th century. It was originally used as medicine and a symbol of longevity. A few centuries later, in the Kamakura era, the "ichimonji" type became the official symbol of the Japanese royal family. The corolla of this chrysanthemum has 16 petals. Japanese passports also have such chrysanthemum patterns, but the outermost layer is missing. Up to now, chrysanthemum is still a common pattern of Japanese traditional art such as that found on porcelain, lacquer, and kimono.



The family emblem of the Japanese royal family - 16 petals and eight layers of chrysanthemum.

In East Asia, fresh chrysanthemum flowers are dried to make chrysanthemum tea or for consumption. Japanese chefs will use small chrysanthemums as a side dish to sashimi, whereas in Guangdong, China they add fresh chrysanthemum into snake soup to enhance its fragrance.



Chrysanthemum Tea

America's queen of fall flowers, Europe's flower of death

Chrysanthemum was first introduced to the United States during the colonial period because of its easy cultivation, variety of flower types, and colors. Its popularity grows day by day, so that chrysanthemum is now indisputably the "Queen of Fall Flowers". Chrysanthemum is also the largest commercially produced flower in the United States and the most widely cultivated potted plant.



Chrysanthemum cultivation farm

However, an interesting contrast to many Americans' positive feelings about chrysanthemum (which is displayed at athletic games and used as housewarming gifts), in many European countries the chrysanthemum is called the flower of death. In countries such as Belgium and Austria, chrysanthemums are used almost exclusively as commemorative bouquets on tombs.



White chrysanthemums are often used as the flowers for funerals

Can I grow a decent chrysanthemum?

If it is properly taken care of, chrysanthemums can bloom continuously from fall to early winter. How do you keep your garden full of delightful chrysanthemums blooming and safe from pests? Read and practice the following tips carefully, and you will reap flowers that your neighbors will soon envy.

First, try to plant your chrysanthemum in spring so that it has a whole season to grow. This is especially helpful for the growth of the root system. Your chrysanthemum may bloom early in summer, but you can nip off these buds so that the plant will bloom with more graceful flowers in fall.



Chrysanthemum can be propagated by sowing, cutting, and branching. The most effective method is branching. In spring, you can divide a chrysanthemum that has been growing for more than two years, but take care to avoid damage to the root. It is also very important to change pots for chrysanthemums. The root systems of chrysanthemums grow very fast. If a pot is not changed for a long time, the root system will become crowded and have a hard time retaining water. Choose a larger pot than the original one and gently break up the root system while trying not to damage it for repotting.

Size: Two to three feet tall

Hardiness: Zones 3 through 9

Sunlight: Full sun

Soil: Rich and moist, slightly acidic to neutral

Bloom Time: Late summer and fall