



Chrysanthemums

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Rick Gush

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Photo by Rick Gush As far as I can see, the two countries in the world that grow the most chrysanthemums are Japan and Italy.

Japan grows some spectacular mums, and my favorites are the cascading plants that can hang down 30 feet or more. Pretty amazing when one realizes that the plants are cut back to stubs every year and must grow all that length every year.

These big chrysanthemum waterfalls are amazing and have so many flowers that the green parts of the plants are all hidden.

Italy grows a whole lot of chrysanthemums too; both potted greenhouse varieties and long stemmed cutting garden types. Many of the millions of vegetable gardens in Italy will include a row of cutting chrysanthemums that get harvested at the end of October.

But while Japan and every other temperate climate country grows mums for decoration, Italian gardeners and nurseries grow chrysanthemums almost exclusively for placing in the cemeteries. Lots of countries (France, Poland, China, Japan) use white mums for funerals and grave decorations, but other colors are freely used as decorative garden plants.

Almost nobody here in Italy grows chrysanthemums to decorate their gardens because this flower is used in Italy just for honoring dead relatives. I was going to plant some mums to decorate the vegetable garden, but my wife nixed the idea.

November 2 is the Day of the Dead in Italy, and for the few days preceding this event, everybody goes to the cemeteries to clean up the graves of their loved ones and place flowers on the graves.

Photo by Rick Gush Chrysanthemums are the overwhelming favorites for cemetery use, but lots of other flowers are used as well. My wife and I went to the cemetery on Saturday to take care of her father's grave and we also visited two other local cemeteries because I like looking at the impressive floral displays at this time of year.

There are more than just chrysanthemums in the cemeteries, and I saw a fair number of anthuriums, some roses and even a fair number of orchids. The city plants chrysanthemums in some of the civic parks in late October but then they replace the mums with other flowers in the second week of November.

All the nurseries, grocery stores and florists do a big business in this period, and I counted seventeen different types and colors of chrysanthemums at the nursery nearest my home.

The cemeteries here are different than those I saw in the states. Instead of lawns, the cemeteries usually have three sections: the big fancy marble family monuments where rich people put their relatives, the ground level tombstones, and the large walls filled with niches.

The general practice is that newly departed persons can be placed in the ground level tombstones area, but after twenty years the remains are transferred to one of the wall niches to make way for new residents on the ground level.

I'm nuts for mums and I've finally figured out my own chrysanthemum gardening strategy: Next year, I'll grow some tall mums to take to the cemetery for the Day of the Dead.

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