

Many of our plants bloomed early this year. Fall asters and chrysanthemums are no exception. You'll want to start haunting our local nurseries and garden centers now to pick up these appealing splashes of color to brighten your fall gardens. You can purchase some at the WSU Kitsap Master Gardener sponsored class on fall container gardening at Northwest College of Arts (near Milepost 9 across from the George Fireworks Stand) on Sunday September 26 at 1 p.m. Also haunt all our local nurseries and garden centers.

Asters come in many shades of blue and purple, including magenta, and even pink and white. Heights range from one to four feet. These appealing fall-blooming plants come in all shapes and sizes and make great cut flowers, lasting for at least a week at a time. Each stem is covered with multiple blossoms providing pollen for bees, butterflies and other insects preparing for winter.

Asters are related to sunflowers growing in annual, biennial and perennial forms. The English named them "starworts" for their star-shaped blossoms. Later becoming "Michaelmas Daisy" because they bloom near St. Michaelmas Day in September. Legend has it that Jupiter was angered by the fighting and destruction during the Iron Age when people learned to make tools and weapons. Jupiter sent a flood to destroy the earth. The gods fled the earth and the last to leave was the goddess Astraea. In her sadness she asked to be turned into a star and her tears dropped to earth and turned to lovely starflowers or asters.

I have perennial asters growing in my garden in three different types of soil and moisture conditions. One group is in nearly full shade, one in well-draining full sun and one in a moist, sunny area with clay soil. If you've been timid about planting other perennials in your garden try asters, you can't fail. Pop them in the ground and they'll perform profusely. One caveat though, they'll definitely multiply

Multiplying asters aren't necessarily a bad thing. Plant them in bare areas of your garden. They're great for weed control, growing so densely weeds can't wend their sneaky way into the group. Plant asters in containers if you want to control their spread. Some varieties have dark almost purple stems with evergreen-looking leaves. The petals of the flowers are longer and the plant grows airily without seeming to form such large spreading clumps.

To control clumping, spreading asters cut them down to the ground when they begin growing in early spring. In spite of their unruly behavior asters are truly a plant worthy of any garden. Their color and abundance is welcome when nearly all other plants are winding down. Plant asters in your gardens and you'll have them to share (both bouquets and plants) with all your friends for years to come.

Chrysanthemums are related to dahlias, sunflowers, zinnia, marigolds and cosmos. They too are in the Asteracea family and are composed of bundles of flowers on one blossom. Each bloom is composed of hundreds of flowers called florets. The National Chrysanthemum Society places these plants in thirteen categories. Painted, Marguerite and Shasta Daisies are related to chrysanthemums. Sometimes you'll find references to "hardy chrysanthemums." I "Googled" it and found as many conflicting sites as I found sites in agreement on what constitutes a "hardy chrysanthemum." Most of the sites recommend propagating chrysanthemums by using cuttings in fall and spring for greatest success in continuing the plants.

Years ago, one of my daughter Annie's classmates, Joan Nute's mom Pauline Nute in East Bremerton grew the most incredible and colorful chrysanthemums every year. Her varieties were very short (without pinching) and the jewel-toned plants carpeted several borders along walkways at Pauline's home. It would be worth asking your favorite nursery person what varieties they'd recommend for diminutive growing chrysanthemums. The varieties you'll find grown in greenhouses for indoor enjoyment (around Thanksgiving) can sometimes survive outside but they'll end up about three to four feet tall over time unless you pinch them back.

I hope you'll try your luck with these bright colorful fall plants. They're great in containers or directly in the garden. This year after the blossoms begin to fade, cut each stem back to four to six inches and either leave the plants in containers or plant the chrysanthemums directly into your garden soil in a sunny, well-drained spot. If our winter isn't too severe you'll be rewarded in January through March with blossoms. Many chrysanthemums last for several years in our Northwest gardens. To find out more about chrysanthemums visit the National Chrysanthemum Society site at [www.mums.org](http://www.mums.org).

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