

# Mix It Up For Fall



By Roger C. Styer

**H**ere it is September already! Wow, this summer has sure flown by fast. Here in the Chicago area we really didn't have much of a summer, as we had the 4th coolest summer on record. So, we were already thinking fall back in early August. But for the rest of the country, September means fall bedding season. And that means mums and pansies. Or should there be more?

## THE TRADITIONAL FALL SEASON

In the Chicago area, stores have lots of mums, a few pansies, a little flowering kale and cabbage and maybe some tired-looking perennials. In my travels around the country in the fall, I see mainly mums and pansies. With the start of cool weather in the South and on the West Coast, consumers think of cool-weather crops and start buying. But are they getting tired of the limited choices? Should we really expect consumers to plant pansies and mums every fall? What about other crops that could do well until true winter weather? Or what about mixed containers?

In some areas, I will see dianthus, snapdragons, petunias, dusty miller and a few other cool-season annuals being sold in garden centers and box stores. Container sizes will usually be flats and 4-inch pots. Rarely will I see any mixed containers of these crops with pansies, violas, mums

and flowering kale. We expect that consumers will either plant into the ground, replacing what they had during the spring and summer or pot up their own mixed containers.

The traditional fall season has become saturated with mums and pansies, with the box stores keeping prices low and growers not making much, if any, money. If you don't believe the fall mum market is saturated, drive around parts of Pennsylvania and New Jersey and look for roadside vendors selling 8-inch mums at five for \$10. Growers have to have mums ready in July because the box stores have no good color to sell; however, mums do not last long when the temperatures are in the 90s. So, what value are consumers really getting from fall mums that last 2-4 weeks at best?

Planting pansies in the fall will ensure color through the fall months and then again until May or June. Consumers in the Midwest have been slow to pick up on the benefits of planting pansies in the fall, but marketing programs being pushed by a few growers are making a dent in the market. I have always felt that a whole lot of pansies and violas could be sold in the Midwest in the fall if we could just educate and show consumers how well they will do.

## NON-TRADITIONAL FALL CROPS

I can remember as a kid growing up in Pennsylvania that my parents would buy a fall mum or two every year and plant them in the ground around our yard. Every year, they would come back and bloom better than ever. Pretty soon, we ran out of room for mums and had to wait for some of them to die off.

Well, I believe many consumers do not plant fall mums in the ground anymore and expect them to come back every year. Especially in the South, consumers are putting mums in larger pots like they do geraniums. I know landscapers do not plant mums and expect them to come back next year. And I think mum breeding has emphasized better heat tolerance and flowering

rather than overwintering. So, with that said, it would seem that fall mums are disposable decorative items for most consumers.

Proven Winners is pushing its Fall Magic program with independent garden centers and box stores. This program could increase consumer purchases, but we should put together the mixed containers for them instead of having them buy the small pots to do their own. If their previous mixed containers still look good in September, they are unlikely to buy small pots and replace what they have in their containers. But they may be more likely to buy new mixed containers to add to what they already have and then dump the old ones when the weather gets too cool.

There are a number of crops, both seed and vegetative, that will do well in cool weather. Crops such as nemesia, diascia, osteospermum, petunias, dusty miller, snapdragons and dianthus will do well in cool weather and continue to flower until hard freezes or snow. And I haven't even mentioned perennials! Think about what crops you sell early in the spring when the weather is still cool, and you can grow the same crops in the fall. Remember to start any long-day flowering crops well before the fall equinox to get them in bloom.

I think the most important thing to remember is how consumers will use flowers in the fall. Make it easy for them by putting together some interesting and colorful mixed containers. Use mums and pansies in these combos, but increase the product line and color by looking into other crops. Remember that a number of consumers think of flowering plants as decorative items or accessories in their outdoor living areas. They get tired of the same old items and colors. So, give the consumer something different in a form they can easily handle, and they will buy! GPN

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