

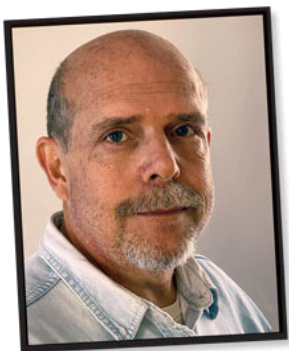
GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Manufacturing Chrysanthemums

Lowell Halvorson



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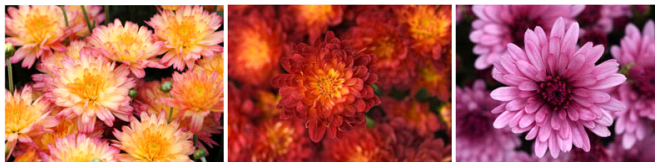
Awesome color. Awesome price. It sounds like a mum slogan because these are the unique superpowers chrysanthemums bring to the market. No other major crop delivers such big color at such a low price. Dependable, reliable, repeatable and interchangeable are other important marketing words for the category—the same words Stanley uses to describe the tools they manufacture. I could argue that mums are manufactured fashion products, too, like designer clothes.

Industry focus on durability

Mum's manufactured flavor comes from two places: First is the supply chain's emphasis on durability. The wiggle test and the drop test bake strength directly into the cuttings. Wiggling or shaking a pot during trial exposes possible breaks in the branching that would lead to splitting later.

Dropping a mature pot like a customer with butterfingers brings to light any possible cracks in the dome. Strong branches and sturdy plants resist impact better. If no breaks appear, that candidate moves forward in breeding.

These tests are done up and down the supply chain, from field trials to distributors to the growing farms themselves. This industry-wide attention to durability creates the sheer weight of inspection, squeezing any weaker stuff out of the market. As a result, mums are much stronger now than they were 10 or 20 years ago.



Left: The signature look of Flamingo Pineapple Pink is its three-toned look: pale pink tips, pale yellow flower and golden center. Growing on the cooler side brings out more pink.

Center: The reverse contrast of Metrona Bicolor Bronze is unusual. The light yellow center glows from within like a smoky fire. A new introduction, this cultivar has shown up on the sales charts.

Right: Cosmic builds an entire series around the dark eye theme.

The rise of the families

Another influence leading to the manufactured vibe comes from tight-fisted mum families designed around very specific traits, down to the week of the bloom. Modern mum series come from closely controlled sports of highly programmable breeding candidates. This strategy produces cultivars so tightly matched they're nearly identical in all traits but color.

Predictable bloom times, dependable production, repeatable performance, interchangeable colors and precise tolerances are deeply woven into the selection process that determines the single winner from thousands of other perfectly good mums. This best-of-a-thousand strategy pairs up nicely with the high volume/low price formula of the mum market. Manufacture well to profit well—just like the tool guys.

The photos show the precise tolerance mums can deliver. It takes just a sliver of difference for a white blossom to pop up slightly from the yellow ones around it. That means the two cultivars came within millimeters of each other in a product designed to fit comfortably in a half bushel basket. What other crop gets tolerances this close?



Current color trends

Families enable mums to do their tricolor trick, blending colors from three different cuttings into an array of design styles from pie slices to starry mixtures. Tricolor combos give more value to the mum product, allowing growers to ship a premium mum with a better margin.

Left: Notice the orange mum matches the calla lily and the white mum catches the veins of the ornamental cabbage. Mums use their wide range of colors to stay fresh and current in the decor scene. Affordable components let the younger generation make their own pieces.

Another chrysanthemum party trick is the sophisticated pigmentation of the blooms. Breeders can tease out wide variations of a single shade, but, more importantly, they can mix complementary or contrasting colors within the same bloom to create the illusion of a blend within a single solid planting.

A good example of this effect is Flamingo Pineapple Pink, a late-season mum in sophisticated yellow with soft pink tips. Pigments saturate differently with the temperature. Higher degrees produce creamier blooms, whereas slightly lower ones expose more pink.

Part of the recent popularity surge in dark plants, Metrona Bicolor Bronze has a yellow eye darkening to heavily petaled bronzy reds. The contrast is high, but not sharp; visually, it glows from the center.

Cosmic builds an entire family around the ombre effect, with a very dark eye and lighter tips. This series has a European-style habit, targeting W40 (women in their 40s) for its retail display. Meteor Bronze and Lunar Pink have the greatest contrast between the eye and the edges. Solar Yellow has a small dark eye, creating more of a pinhole or polka-dot pattern over the dome.

Ball Seed publishes the ratio of their mum color sales on a national scale and the ratio is instructive. Yellow sells the best at 27%, followed by Orange at 23% and Red at 19%, then everything else. Broadly stated, you want about three

times as many yellows in production as whites, going a little heavier on pinks. Purples are in between. There's some wobble from year to year, but very little.

Mums and their competitors

A mum backlash does exist, a trend I call “mums and more.” Most places can't walk away from chrysanthemum sales, but they can stress other fall material, like Sedum Autumn Fire, Ornamental Pepper Black Pearl, Heuchera Caramel, Echinacea Cheyenne Spirit, Pennisetum Fireworks, Cabbage Glamour Red and Pennisetum Vertigo. For progressive growers who lean hard into the message, chrysanthemum's share of autumn revenues can dip below 50%. It's possible to build a business off more than mums.

But most choose to stay with the mum. It still churns fall color into money at the bank. It's still the big dog crop of autumn. Mum's sense of same-y works to its advantage here. In autumn, mums are the horticultural equivalent of mac-and-cheese—comfort food for the soul that grounds the porch to the neighborhood with a sense of belonging. Yes, it's hand-wavy creative speak, but ask someone who puts a mum on the stoop (younger) or in the garden (older) and they're likely to tell you the same thing. Predictable. Dependable. Reliable. It's more than just awesome color at an awesome price. **GT**

Lowell Halvorson is a consultant and writer in Fairfield, Connecticut, for retail and wholesale horticulture, specializing in business development. He also covers the breeding community for GrowerTalks magazine. You can contact him at (203) 257-9345 or halvorson@triadicon.com.