

Chrysanthemum



The name Chrysanthemum comes from the Greek *Chryos* meaning gold and *anthemon* meaning flower. The original chrysanthemum was yellow, today there is a wide variety of shades: yellow, white, cream, pink, and red, ochre, bronze...

Chrysanthemums make up a large family and range from the simple daisy to the spectacular, large bloom of the florists' chrysanthemums. In many parts of the Western world, chrysanthemum is the symbol of Mother's Day; in China, Japan and some parts of Asia, chrysanthemum is a part of the culture. Originally a daisy-like plant growing wild in China, the cultivated one (*Chrysanthemum morifolium*) was introduced to Japan and then later on to Europe in the 16th century. The original Chinese cultivars were of tightly incurved formation, the Japanese types display greater range of colours and greater size in blooms.

The modern cultivated chrysanthemum of today, also known as florists' chrysanthemum, or 'mum', consists mainly of the Japanese types. An oriental legend tells of a maiden in her dream being told that her beloved would live as many years as a flower in her garden had petals. On waking up, she painstakingly tore each serrated petal of a carnation into sections, thus creating the 'today' chrysanthemum and its symbol of longevity.

In Asian culture, chrysanthemum has symbolic meanings of gentility and nobility, as the orderly arrangement of each single petal and the way they unfold in sequence represent the highest degree of perfection and discipline. For a period in early Asian history, only the emperor and nobility were allowed to cultivate the plant, it was one of the four 'Noble Plants' (plum blossom, orchid and bamboo being the other three). The plant was also the symbol of a scholar in retirement, its beauty urged him to perfect his artistic and literary talents and its medicinal and culinary attributes inspired him to entertain his friends with tea and wine made from its flowers. At one time the flag of Japan was a chrysanthemum with 16 petals around a central disk. In 1877, the Meiji emperor of Japan established the "*Order of the Chrysanthemum*", the highest honour that could be bestowed by the Emperor, mainly on members of the Royal family and foreign royalties or heads of state. The badge consists of a central cabochon garnet with four silver chrysanthemums placed between green leaves encircling the stone.



'Order of the Chrysanthemum' Badge

The flowers used for eating and making wine and teas are the yellow single daisy type. Fresh petals are sprinkled over soups or eaten raw in salads; dried flowers are sold in packets for brewing tea. The leaves of *Chrysanthemum Coronarium* or *Garland Chrysanthemum* (commonly known as chop suey greens) are used as cooked vegetable, the very young shoots can be eaten raw while the older ones are usually blanched first, or they can be stir fried very quickly (overcooking makes them bitter).

Chop suey greens



Both chrysanthemum flowers and leaves have been used in Eastern herbal medicine for a long time. The flower heads are gathered in late autumn when they are fully opened, then dried, or first steamed and then dried. The leaves are usually used fresh to make into a poultice for the external treatment of sores, boils or inflammations. Sometimes, when only dried leaves are available, they are ground into a powder then mixed with water to form a mash. For internal use, chrysanthemum was listed in traditional herbal books under the non-toxic category, it is said to improve one's vision, lower fevers, dilate the coronary artery and detoxify the body. Traditional home uses of chrysanthemum include treatment of headache and associated symptoms like insomnia, dizziness; redness of the eyes, conjunctivitis, boils and abscesses.

On a personal note, chrysanthemum always reminds me of my grandmother who enjoyed and excelled in fine needlework. As far back as I can remember, we grandchildren always had our pillowslips and pyjamas hand stitched and beautifully embroidered. Since such close-range precision work put a great strain on her eyes, my cousin and I often made a detour to her place on the way home from school to have a cup of chrysanthemum tea with her and to give her a 'chrysanthemum' eye treatment: after we drank the tea, we gently squeezed off excess liquid from the flower heads then placed them when they were still hot (but not too hot) over her eyelids and then replaced them with new ones when they turned cold. We named chrysanthemum 'Grandma's flower'. During her last days of life, our mothers took turn to nurse her and made her many cups of chrysanthemum tea, they made sure she always had fresh chrysanthemums in her room and renamed the flower 'Mum's flower'. I never dreamt then that many years later I would settle down in the West where I would become a mother and chrysanthemum is the symbol of Mother's Day.

