

Chrysanthemum or Dahlia?



An interesting question, what is the difference?

When it comes to appearances, they both have similar flowers with almost endless configurations: single, double, of multiple forms, from flat-petalled to pompon, anemone, collarette and fimbriated.

In our mountains, dahlias start to flower from around Christmas to early January through to the end of April and early May. The flowers come in nearly every eye-catching colour except true blue. They may be as small as 2cm in diameter or, in the case of 'dinner plate' varieties, up to 30cm wide. Chrysanthemums bloom a bit later, from early autumn until the first frost, the flowers are typically about 5-6cm in diameter, and have a narrower range of colour, mostly of autumn tones of yellow, gold, pink and orange, even bronze.

As far as similarities go, interestingly, both plants are edible. The Aztecs cultivated the common garden dahlias for their large edible tubers. These tubers are comparable in size to potatoes. Their colour ranges from white to tan to red to blue-grey. They can be eaten raw or cooked. The taste is somewhat similar to yacon or jicama. The texture is crisp and juicy. The flavour ranges from bland and starchy to mildly sweet.

In Asian cuisine, the yellow single daisy type of chrysanthemum flowers is used for eating and making wine and teas, 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.

Now we come to their differences. Dahlias are native to the warm, sunny climate of central Mexico, they are, in fact, that nation's official flower. Spanish explorers took the tubers back to Europe in the 1500s, where the plants found themselves in common gardens and very slowly gained acceptance in the French formal gardens or the great English landscaped estates of the 18th century.

Chrysanthemums are native to China where they have been used in medicine and art for thousands of years. 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). In much the same sense as the British Crown, in Japan, the Chrysanthemum Throne represents the emperor and imperial family.

Shall we say one reminds us of the gentry folk and the other aristocracy?

Dahlias grow from tubers, which are thick, horizontal roots while chrysanthemums grow in root clumps and will spread year after year if the roots survive underground. Chrysanthemums are quite winter hardy and able to survive winters in relatively cold climates, although they may not return reliably and are often grown as annuals. In warmer zones, they are considered herbaceous perennials. Dahlias are more tender, they may be grown in colder climates but in those climates, the tubers must be lifted in autumn and stored over winter. The dormant period the tubers experience while stored is believed to help increasing flower production the following season.

As for their growing habit, the smallest chrysanthemums are between 15 to 30cm, the 'tall' cultivars are classified as those over 45cm, some can grow to 90cm, including cultivars of the popular garden or hardy mum. In general, the plants tend to be wider than they are tall. The flowers don't vary as much in diameter, ranging from 2.5 to 10cm across. Dahlias on the other hand, vary more widely. Large dahlias range from about 1-1.5m tall; the best known are the 'dinner-plate dahlias' with their 25-30cm diameter double flowers; they require some kind of support to withstand winds and rain. Medium dahlias, also known as 'border dahlias', are compact 25-50cm tall plants, which can be grown in large containers. Small dahlias are perfect for window boxes. These 12-25cm plants bloom for a long time and remain fairly compact.

And many chrysanthemums have fragrances, while dahlias generally do not.

So how to tell the two flowers apart?

The easiest way is to look at their leaves.

Chrysanthemums have delicate, lacy looking leaves with many lobes. Dahlia leaves are ovate, with pointed tips and slightly serrated edges. In a garden setting, one can also differentiate the two plants by the way they grow and spread, sometimes by the fragrance of the flowers.

Season-wise, dahlias are almost at their end in April/May while chrysanthemums are then at their peak.



However, in a flower arrangement or a bouquet, where one cannot see the leaves nor smell the flowers, then it can be quite a challenge to tell the two flowers apart.