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A Magnificent Mum Garden
How to Downsize in Style
A SIREN CALL from Alabama’s Gulf Coast can come from many sources: white-sand beaches, the catch of the day, and (of course) the infamous Flora-Bama bar at the Florida state line. In a few weeks, though, all will be silenced by the lure of an experience you can’t get at any other time or place—waterfalls of chrysanthemums flowing down and around Bellingrath Gardens and Home in little Theodore, Alabama.

It’s the largest such display in the entire country.

These aren’t the run-of-the-mill potted mums you buy every October that resemble tidy meatballs with flowers attached. Instead, they belong to an old class of lanky, later-blooming plants called cascade mums that can grow stems more than 4 feet long. Over a period of 10 months, Bellingrath’s growers meticulously pinch and prune to train
them into graceful shapes—such as spheres, columns, and baskets—as well as the gardens’ signature spectacle, the multicolored cloak of mums draping the Mirror Lake bridge.

“The original cascade mums came to Bellingrath from Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania more than a half century ago,” says operations manager Chuck Owens. None of those exist anymore; current ones descend from mums obtained from other growers and hobbyists who no longer supply them. Thus, Bellingrath’s mums are truly unique. Greenhouses filled with stock plants of 17 different selections supply around 20,000 cuttings that are rooted to produce the plants needed to pull off the festival.

This year, the 54th Annual Fall Outdoor Cascading Chrysanthemums display kicks off on November 4 and runs through November 22. Why so late? It’s partly due to the nature of cascade mums: November is when they bloom. The mild coastal weather plays a big part too. “We typically don’t get a frost here until mid-December,” notes executive director Bill Barrick. “We can display them outdoors, while other gardens like Callaway and Longwood must keep them in conservatories.”

Although the mum-covered bridge is a must-see for any festival visit, don’t stop there. An astounding curvilinear
border of cascade mums lines the Great Lawn. Blooms also adorn Bessie and Walter Bellingrath’s former house, the Delchamps Gallery of Boehm Porcelain, the Mermaid Fountain, and bridges in the Asian-American and Rose Gardens.

Think you might like to try growing cascade mums yourself? That’s fine, if you can find a supplier (Bellingrath keeps a tight rein on theirs) and you enjoy tending plants for 10 months a year. My advice—visit Bellingrath this November instead. It may not rock quite like the Flora-Bama, but you won’t need someone to drive you home afterward. For more info, visit bellingrath.org. SL