autumn-flowering chrysanthems

It's the end of November and I can still fill my arms with flowers. The chrysanthemums in the garden and in the greenhouse are looking marvellous. Every year I grow them, I like them more, and my chrysanth obsession is now set to overtake my long-standing loyalty to dahlias. Dahlias are clobbered by the first frost; not so chrysanthems.

Some have wayward, extravagant flowers - a far cry from the uptight, prissy things we expect. I have on my desk a seed pod of Allium schubertii and a few stems of Chrysanthemum 'Flyaway' and 'Seaton's Galaxy'. The two spider chrysanths have similar hairstyles to the allium. If alliums give fireworks in the summer, chrysanths do the same in late autumn and winter. Alliums do it in purple, white and, occasionally, blue and yellow; but chrysanths come in acid green, purple, crimson, orange, conker-brown and bright magenta.

Chrysanthemums are no more trouble to grow than annuals (see below) and if you choose the right varieties, will flower for just as long. I will be picking chrysanths from September until Christmas, and it's a harvest not of seedpods or berries, but of showy, velvety blooms, with five flowers on each stem.

They're also cut-and-come-again. If you pick the leader with the top clump of flowers this week, the buds below will flower in a week or two. That's extraordinary, given the temperature. And their final winning card is vase life. That's why they fill the garage forecourts; there is no longer-lasting, better-value cut flower.

This is my third year of growing chrysanths, trying new varieties and refining my collection, and I now have clear front-runners for early, mid-season and late flowers.

The earlies are the best ones to grow if you can't move them under cover. They will start flowering in early autumn and fade out about now. The mid-season ones are also happy outside in a bright, dry autumn. The late-flowering varieties, however, need a greenhouse or another protected growing space: it will be too cold, wet and windy for them outside in late November and December, but they will do fine dug from the garden and potted up to stand in a conservatory or sunny porch.

I have seven late-flowering varieties on trial, which should be perfect for picking at Christmas: the Shoesmith Series, in crimson, salmon, gold, orange and bronze, and the Medallion Series, in red and cerise. None is yet showing colour in our frost-free, unheated greenhouse.

The early and mid-season varieties, however, are looking good. 'Froggy' was the earliest of my 16 forms to open, in September. It has small, acid-green flowers, a bit neat but good en masse, with 15 or 20 flowers at the top of each stem. The bright green fades after a few weeks if you don't pick them, and the edges of the petals become tinged with purple. They are now less dramatic, but still lovely, softer and prettier than their first flush, and ideal for arranging with violets, pinks and mauves.

Next to flower are 'Sheer Purple', in rich magenta, and the deep-pink 'Bagley Pink'. These two give an abundance of flowers to mix with the skeletal spiders' webs of 'Seaton's Galaxy' (purple with a green eye), 'Streamer' (mauve) and 'Shamrock' (acid-green), three mid-season spider chrysanths of great elegance.

A contrasting splash of coral-pink and orange is what you need with these richly coloured flowers, and the angular 'Evening Glow' and towering stems of 'Princess Armguard Bronze' give just that. The latter stands a good 50cm (18in) taller than the others.
My final favourite is 'Red Bagley', which is the colour of conkers, with a hint of flame-red. This has been in flower for six weeks and still looks perfect.

So will you choose dahlias or chrysanthemums to fill your autumn beds? I say make room for both.