

MUM-ZILLA – reprinted with permission from the Forth Worth, TX Star-Telegram in the Fall of 2006.

MUM-ZILLA! Those beloved, beribboned homecoming corsages are bigger, heavier and more gewgawed than ever.

There they are, hanging in grocery stores and craft stores and florists' windows: big bundles of white silk flowers, smothered under teddy bears and plastic trinkets, bells and feathers and glitter and lights and ribbon — lots and lots of ribbon.

It's football season in Texas. And to girls of a certain age — and, yes, to girls who used to be a certain age — that means one thing: **homecoming** mums.

Homecoming mums?, you ask. What are those? And that's when you give it away: You didn't grow up around here — or in any of the pockets throughout the South where **homecoming** games are celebrated with total floral insanity.

Well, we've heard your jokes. We've seen you recoil in horror at the beribboned monstrosities that dangle precariously from our chests. We are aware — oh, come on, of course we're aware — that we look a bit ridiculous. But Texas girls are going to stop wearing mums at **homecoming** when Texas guys stop playing football: never in a million years.

So today, we celebrate all that's magnificent about the mum. If you're new to the tradition, here's your chance to catch up.

It's a Texas thing

This thought has never crossed a lot of Texas kids' minds, but the **homecoming** mum isn't an annual ritual for everyone. The fact is, most people in Maine and Michigan and California never have, and never would, perhaps, walk around wearing a cluster of flowers worthy of the Kentucky Derby.

So where have mums become a way of life? Jennifer Horst has been trying to map that out. The University of North Texas grad student, who's working on a master's in documentary film production, is making a documentary about **homecoming** mums. The idea came to her, Horst says, when she started trying to explain the tradition to someone who wasn't from Texas.

"She was very confused," Horst says, "about why she had to buy a mum for her son to give to his date. I thought — if she doesn't know, there's a chance that a lot of people don't know."

Horst has talked to people from all over the country. Some of them know about mums; others don't. Her conclusion: While kids exchange **homecoming** mums in a smattering of areas all over the country, you won't find mums any bigger or better beyond the Texas border.

"Some other places do it," she says, "but they don't do it the way we do."

Of course, the world is getting smaller, and you can't keep a lid on local culture. As people move around the country, they take the tradition with them.

Cindy Embrey has been making mums and selling them from her Arlington home for a dozen years; she fills about 1,500 orders every football season. Now, through her Web site — MumsandGarters.com. — orders come from all over the place, mostly from transplanted Texans who miss their mums. She recently shipped one to Chicago, another to Colorado. One of this year's orders came from someone in Italy. Now that's dedication to tradition.

Mum etiquette

How does it all work? Well, mums started out as mere corsages, and there's a mating ritual that goes along with that. They've traditionally been something, like phone calls and engagement rings, that boys give and girls hope to receive. The bigger your mum, tradition says, the more you are loved — and, in turn, the more popular and important you are. Tiny mum? Cheap boyfriend. Social disaster.

But just like everything else, mum traditions are changing. It's not strictly a boy-girl thing anymore.

"I may be stretching it here, but I think the women's movement changed the **homecoming** mum," says Julie Ardery, an Austin writer and sociologist who studies flower customs. After the Gloria Steinem era, she says, "girls who didn't have dates to the **homecoming** game said, 'To heck with this — we'll buy our own flowers, or our moms will buy us flowers, or

I'll buy one for my girlfriend and she'll buy one for me.' There's no longer the hang-up of having to have a boyfriend to wear a mum, and I think that's great."

That translated, at first, into smaller mums given to multiple friends.

"In the '80s there were a lot of 'friendship mums,'" Horst says, "and there were people walking around with six, seven mums. But they weren't the size they are now."

Today, friends can buy mums of any size for each other. Girls can buy friendship garters for the guys they just hang out with. The rules and customs differ from region to region, even school to school, but the etiquette's much more relaxed.

The evolution of mums

So where did **homecoming** mums come from?

No one seems to know for sure exactly when the tradition started, but we do know one thing: The mum wasn't always the mountain of ribbon and glitter it is today. The mum started out as a simple corsage.

There's evidence that football fans wore chrysanthemum corsages as early as the 1880s. At schools all over the country, it became traditional to wear a chrysanthemum to football games — which, like everything else, used to be dressier occasions. A few years into the 20th century, colleges began to celebrate **homecoming**, inviting alumni back to visit and reminisce and cheer for the football team. But who first pinned on a chrysanthemum and declared it a **homecoming** tradition? Nobody really knows.

"That's a frustration when you're dealing with things that are folk customs," says Ardery, the Austin writer and sociologist. "They arise and sometimes fade away with no names attached and very few written records."

Ardery runs the Web site HumanFlowerProject.com, which explores the ways that flowers are a part of our lives and our customs. She offers this anecdotal evidence: Her mother-in-law remembers wearing a mum to college **homecoming** games in the 1940s.

"Now, it wasn't these elaborate, gigantic mums with the streamers and all the trinkets," Ardery says. "It was just a very simple, usually white flower that sometimes might have a ribbon attached to it."

But you know how things go. By the 1950s, the ribbons were getting longer and more numerous. A decade later, Texas high school girls were wearing big white flowers with ribbons that trailed down to their ankles. Or past them.

"The most important thing about it was that your streamers were long enough to step on," remembers Martha White, president of Gordon Boswell Flowers who graduated from Paschal High School in 1968. "Oh my gosh, you carried the streamers practically over your arm to walk."

Besides a hazardous amount of ribbon, mums of the 1960s were beginning to be loaded down with embellishments. Pipe cleaners were fashioned into letters (say, PHS) or, if the girl dated a football player, the player's jersey number. And all that was mounted directly on the mum, which was a real, rapidly wilting white flower. Cowbells dangled from the ribbons so the girls could make noise when they walked. These mums were not to be ignored.

Sometime in the late '70s or early '80s, something happened that would change **homecoming** forever: silk flowers. Artificial flowers, once plastic and fake-looking, began to look nicer and more realistic. Silk mums lasted longer and held up better under the stress of excessive embellishment. So by the mid-1980s, girls had all but abandoned mums made with real blooms. They wanted silk flowers, and they wanted a lot of them; a single was no longer enough. Girls insisted on wearing doubles, triples, even bigger bundles of flowers that sprawled across their chests. And as the corsages grew, so did the embellishments. Trinkets multiplied. Braided ribbons blended with plain ones.

By the early '90s, mum designers were using hot glue to attach teddy bears — teddy bears, people — to the silk flowers. It didn't matter that your mascot was a cougar or a lion or a panther; if you were a high school girl in the '90s, you wanted to wear a teddy bear on your chest. The stuffed bear had nothing to do with school spirit; it signified a schmoopy sort of love between you and the boy who gave you the mum. A handful of flowers arranged in the shape of a heart and obscured by a teddy bear? It was as if your boyfriend had hired a skywriter to spell out "I love you" in the sky. (Incidentally, the skywriter might have cost less.)

Today, mums are even bigger; they sometimes cover the entire chest. And they're laden with even more flowers, more ribbons, more trinkets. Feather boas add floaty fluff. Plush animals sometimes play fight songs. Battery packs power flashing lights that weave through silk flowers like Christmas lights.

Today, some of the biggest mums require more than mere corsage pins — one florist told us she's made mums that weigh 10 pounds.

With some of the bigger mums, says Lisa Baker, who builds mums for Mums and Garters in Arlington, "we have to figure a way to keep it from tearing their clothes."

The heaviest ones now have to be worn around the neck, or with a garter looped around the shoulder for support.

"They used to be tiny," Baker says. "You look at a mum from 1970 and say — 'Oh my gosh, was that really a **homecoming** mum?' It's come a long way since then."

Give in to the excess

Here's the thing about mums. Mums are not elegant. They're not chic and minimalist, cleanly simple, modest or unassuming. None of that. Mums are fussy and frilly, outsized and outrageous and outlandish. If mums were a celebrity, they'd be Marilyn Monroe. If mums were a dessert, they'd be cherries jubilee. Showy and silly and wholly impractical, but a classic, nonetheless.

Before you see them, you can hear them coming. **Homecoming** mums have a certain fluttery jingle that, if you went to high school in Texas, you never quite forget. It's the yards of ribbon swishing back and forth, the cowbells clanking as they hit against knees and cafeteria tables and metal bleacher seats. On game day, mums flutter through high school hallways, creating a symphony of shimmer, tinkly enthusiasm. It's the sound of anticipation, an excitement over football and fake flowers that will never be matched later in life.

Mums, it's true, are absurd. This does not make them any less wonderful — or less desirable. They are artwork. They are personal variations on a common theme, full of symbolism and assertions of identity. They are keepsakes that will hang from bedroom bulletin boards for years.

They are, above all, expensive.

At Hobby Lobby, the average buyer spends between \$125 and \$250, says Jerry McCoy, manager of an Arlington location. For a more affordable option, the store offers some pre-made basics done up in school colors — but even those are \$79.99.

Florists and specialty shops charge about the same: A decent mum can start at \$50 and go up to \$250 or \$300. Garters — the smaller mums that guys wear around their upper arms — are usually cheaper. But still, you're looking at \$50 to \$75 for a decently dressed garter.

It's an investment, a mum. It's money paid to impress a date. It's money spent to fit in, to belong to a group. It's money spent on a keepsake that will last longer than the cheers of the pep rally, longer than the memory of who won the game, longer than the feeling of being 16. And that, for teens all over Texas, is worth it.

Anatomy of a mum

Flowers are key. That's flowers, plural. Go ahead, spring for a double or a triple. If you're desperate for attention, you might wear even more, but be careful: Pile on more than three flowers and heaviness becomes an issue. (You can, of course, wear a heavier mum around your neck, or even pageant-style, on a sash.)

Plush is essential for any over-the-top mum. Teddy bears are basic. If your school mascot isn't an alligator or a unicorn, you can probably find it at a craft store. The plush toys go right on top of the flowers; a little hot glue and you'll be in business.

The rule of ribbons: Too much is not enough. Make the ribbons long. You should have trouble walking or you're not really trying. Put your name and your date's name in glittery letters on one ribbon. Put "**Homecoming** '06" or the name of your school on another. Be sure you throw in some military braids, too. A feather boa has been trendy lately; get one in a school color. Ribbons, by the way, are school colors unless you're a senior; then, at some schools, you should make your mum white-and-silver or white-and-gold.

Christopher Walken was right: Everything needs more cowbell. You can get a big one or several tiny ones — just make sure you have one. Remember that you might have to tape it at school so it doesn't jangle all over the place and disrupt class.

Pile on trinkets, which dangle loosely from long ribbons. Tie on a little gold football. Some people add a whistle and a rabbit's foot for good luck. Add more trinkets that tell people who you are: if you play volleyball, get a little gold volleyball. If you're in choir, get a musical note. Still look sparse? Fill in with plastic pieces that say "Go Team!" and party like it's 1952.

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