

# Hardy Hibiscus

By Betsy Smith, horticultural consultant and garden designer, affiliated with Just Fruits and Exotics Nursery.

Every gardener knows that summer in Florida is tough. Even some of our most reliable color plants get lazy during July and August, and just quit blooming. But there is a cure for the summertime garden blahs, when floral effects wilt and pale under seasonal heat. The search for solutions can begin in our regional marshlands and ditches. Here native swamp mallows can be seen blooming merrily through the summer months. Their distinctive funnel-shaped blossoms appear in vivid shades of red or white, often with a darker contrasting eye. It's delightful enough to see these six-inch flowers at fifty-five miles per hour; imagine the eye-popping possibilities of modern hybrids with saucer-like flowers up to one foot across!



Illustration 1: Swamp Mallow

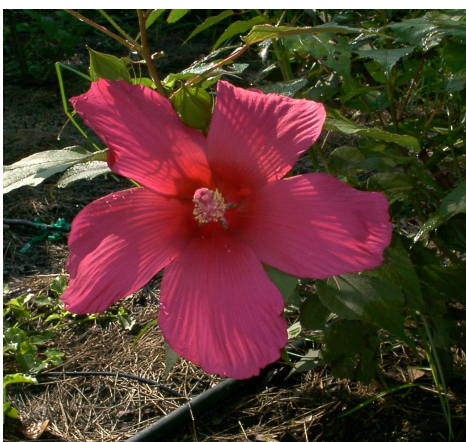


Illustration 2: Mallow

The hibiscus, (or mallow) family is widespread and diverse. Okra and cotton are two useful members. The evergreen shrub, *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, is an emblem of tropical regions everywhere. That familiar and tantalizing ornamental can only exist as an annual here; its evergreen nature is an Achilles heel when faced with our frosts and freezes.

It's a decisive state of winter dormancy and root hardiness that bring the hardy hibiscus around to bloom yet another season for us. *Hibiscus syriacus*, our old-fashioned shrub althea, also known as Rose of Sharon, accomplishes this task by dropping its leaves in fall, leaving its

woody framework secure against the cold. This article, however, will focus on the perennial mallows; plants that die back in winter only to return robustly next season to renewed summer bloom.

Our native *Hibiscus moscheutos*, statuesque at heights of six feet or more in the wild, bears large, broad-petaled rosy to white bowl-shaped blossoms for weeks in wilting heat. Added to its tropical good looks is a hardiness range extending from our coastal plain to northern states from Massachusetts to Michigan. Plant breeders have been paying attention, and twenty or so years ago the Disco Belle series of seed-produced hybrids was launched; the first to grab American gardeners attention in a big way. Twelve-inch blooms on compact plants, flashy colors, and success for minimal effort, ensured their popularity then and today. Seed strains



Illustration 3: *Kopper King*

often bloom the first year if sown indoors and set out early. Local nurseries typically carry these as well as cutting grown selections and hybrids, which at four feet or so, are taller than most seedling types. Notable clones include: *Hibiscus x Blue River*, bearing ten-inch, pure white, moon-like flowers on blue toned foliage over an exceptionally long season; *H. x Kopper King*, forming a stocky clump of rich, purple-toned foliage, topped from midsummer until early fall with foot-wide light pink blooms centered with a dark red eye and veining; *H. x Lady Baltimore*, radiant pink, six to eight-inch blossoms with a large red center; and *H. x Lord Baltimore*, long blooming with deep red, ten-inch flowers.

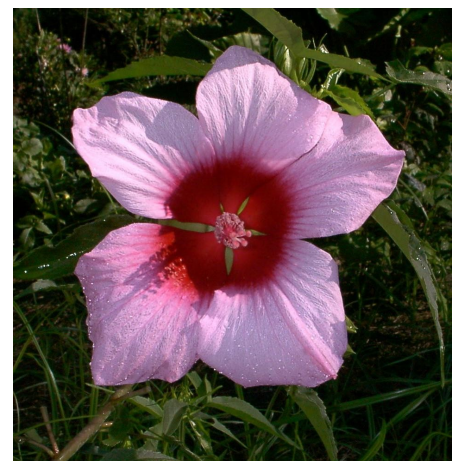


Illustration 4: *Lady Baltimore*

*Hibiscus coccineus*, native to coastal swamps of Florida and Georgia, commonly bears flowers of a clear red color with petals that don't overlap. These are poised on upright plants to eight feet tall and highlighted by graceful, deeply divided glossy foliage, producing an effect that is elegant rather than voluptuous. Its

summer long bloom cycle and adaptability to both wet and dry sites makes it well worth seeking out.

*Hibiscus grandiflorus*, also known as velvet mallow, is yet another of our homegrown swamp dwellers. Clothed in fuzzy gray-green foliage and attaining heights to fifteen feet, this species is known to grow in brackish water, directly in the tidal zones. The ten-inch, slender-petalled flowers, typically a clear soft pink, appear in late summer.

*Hibiscus mutabilis* hails from China, but its double form, *plena*, has long been known to southerners as Confederate Rose. Children delight in its mutability, bringing the double white corsage-sized flowers to school when it blooms in early fall and amazing their peers with its transformation to pink over the course of a day. The plant itself is boldly textured and almost treelike, to ten feet tall, in our part of the south. Another form of the species, *Rubra*, is a smaller stature plant, usually four to six feet, with single nonmutable flowers in vivid shades of deep pink to carmine. This is another species tolerant of brackish water.

The common denominator for all these plants is moisture retentive soil, abundant sunshine, and a site protected from wind. Most prefer mildly acidic soils and azalea-type fertilizers. Amending sandy soils with peat and mulching with pine bark can help them settle in.

Add some hardy hibiscus to your landscape, and even when it's so hot that your entire butterfly garden goes on strike, you'll still have the neighbors saying, "Wow, what is that?"