

The Marsh Mallow – Good Enough to Eat!

Plant sales at Public Gardens definitely provide a pulse of what plant addicts lust for in their Gardens. The Marsh Mallow, botanically known as *Hibiscus moscheutos*, is always an unusual sales success. I am mystified because Marsh Mallows are herbaceous, dying back to the ground each winter, and typically there is rarely any new growth apparent in the container come early May. People are purchasing what appears to be a container of potting soil! Obviously, this is a plant that can stir the passion of a gardener even without any signs of life!

Hibiscus are members of the Malvaceae or Mallow Family, with over 240 genera and 300 species within the *Hibiscus* genus alone! The word *Hibiscus* came from the ancient Greek name of *Ibiskos* or *Hibiskos*, although the exact meaning is uncertain. It was ascribed to a plant we now know as *Althaea officinalis* by Pedanius Discordes (40-90AD). Pedanius was a Physician, Pharmacologist and Roman Army physician during the rule of Nero. Serving in the Roman Army, he had the opportunity to travel, study plants and to write *De Materia Medica*, a 5-volume encyclopedia on herbal medicine that served as a medicinal cornerstone for 1,500 years! Most members of the Mallow Family produce a somewhat slimy material within the tissues, which has the rather unappealing name of mucilage. In Okra, another member of the Malvaceae, it is this mucilage that produces the rather slimy and – to some – unpalatable quality to the fruit (pictured at right). However, the mucilage is an effective emollient for soothing sunburns and for treating sore throats. The mucilage from the roots of *Althaea officinalis* another member of the Malvaceae, were typically mixed with honey and used since ancient Egyptian times for sore throats. During the 19th Century, the French Confectioners whipped the mucilage and added egg whites, creating a product that eventually developed into the modern Marshmallow! The species epithet of *moscheutos* means ‘musk scented’ and refers to the somewhat musky fragrance of the flowers.



Although the ties to Marshmallows might be tempting, this is not the impetus for stirring a gardener’s passion. Rather, the attractive floral display, combined with the plants stature are more likely the keys to this passion! Marsh Mallows are certainly not small plants; depending upon the cultivar, they reach heights of 4-5 feet and spreads of 3-4 feet. The large and blousy flowers begin to appear in mid-July and typically continue well into August. Flowers range from 3-5” in

diameter and although each flower only blooms for one day, the abundance of buds guarantees a long season of interest. The flowers are produced at the tips of the tall stout stems and seedling populations will exhibit flower colors of white to deep rose, often with a central eye of deep maroon (as seen above in a mass planting at Central Park). Although the plants are native to wetlands from Texas and Florida north to southern Ontario, they will grow perfectly well in average garden soil providing it is amended with compost and mulched to maintain adequate moisture levels. The foliage is appropriately scaled to the size of the plant and varies from a simple, triangle shape to 3 slender leaflets. Full sun is best and the plants look best when planted in sweeps where room avails.

Of the numerous selections available, 'Lady Baltimore' bears large pink flowers with a red eye (pictured on the right). It has proven to be one of the more requested selections! The 'Lady' is a large plant, reaching 5' tall or better. If a 'Lord' is needed for the 'Lady', 'Lord Baltimore' bears deep red flowers, on 5' stems. If a more compact of 4' is needed, consider 'Summer Storm' or 'Plum Crazy, which features pink flowers over burgundy foliage.



Another water loving Hibiscus to consider is *Hibiscus coccineus* (pictured at right). The species epithet means scarlet and that certainly describes the flower color well. Growing to 7', this species is only hardy to zone 6/7 and should be given a location that is more protected from winter's chill. Whether the focus is flower, confection or herbal remedy, *Hibiscus* is a plant that has proven to stir the passions of many a gardener!