

Hardy Hibiscus for Florida Landscapes¹

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Hardy hibiscus are an overlooked group of perennials with tremendous potential for the landscape. Hardy hibiscus are herbaceous perennial members of the genus, *Hibiscus*. They are large-flowered, fast-growing plants up to 15 feet tall and 4 to 8 feet wide. They are close relatives of the tropical hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) seen commonly in the landscapes of southern and central Florida. Unlike their tropical counterparts, however, hardy hibiscus are much more cold hardy, vigorous, and long lasting, and they have larger flowers.

In north and central Florida, these plants emerge from the ground in mid to late spring and bloom from late spring through fall. With the exception of some of the herbaceous species, a hard freeze kills the above-ground growth but below-ground stems overwinter and produce new shoots the following spring. Some species require freezing (chilling hours) to release vigorous new growth making them better suited for north and central Florida than for south Florida. Hardy hibiscus prefer full sun or partial shade and any soil that is not too dry. Hardy hibiscus are especially useful in areas where the soil is too wet for other perennials. In the landscape, they are often used as colorful, flowering specimen plants, as borders or as taller components of perennial gardens. Many are well suited to semi-aquatic conditions and can be a great way to plant marshy areas that are otherwise maintenance problems. Some, such as swamp rosemallow (*H. grandiflorus*), are salt tolerant and are very adaptable to coastal areas. Hardy hibiscus is the perfect centerpiece plant in large mixed containers or planted

alone. The bigger the container the bigger the impact it makes.

Hardy Hibiscus Species

Many hardy hibiscus are native to Florida and the south-eastern United States, including comfortroot (*Hibiscus aculeatus*), scarlet rosemallow (*H. coccineus*), swamp rosemallow (*H. grandiflorus*), halberdleaf rosemallow (*H. laevis*), and crimsoneyed rosemallow (*H. moscheutos*). These species are worthy of landscape use in their own right. Swamp rosemallow has rich fuzzy gray green leaves on a plant that reaches up to 15 feet in height. This species is salt tolerant and can grow in brackish water directly in the tidal zones. Flowers of *H. grandiflorus* are about 8 to 10 inches across and a clear soft pink. Flowers of scarlet rosemallow are most commonly a clear red with petals that do not overlap, but the range of forms and closely related species will vary a lot.

Confederate rose, *Hibiscus mutabilis*, is an old fashioned garden plant of the southern US. This upright, tree-like species grows up to 15 feet high and 10 feet wide in freeze-free areas of south and central Florida. In north Florida, heights of 6 to 8 feet are more common due to the annual hard freezes. Large-leaved and coarse-textured, confederate rose begins flowering in late summer producing 6- to 8-inch-blooms that open white and fade to pink. One of its most notable features is that white, light pink and dark pink flowers can be found at the same time on any given

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plant. The most common form is 'Flora Plena' with double flowers. A closely related species, *H. paramutabilis* and its cultivar, 'Rubra', are smaller statured plants (usually 4 to 6 feet in height) with single intense deep pink to carmine blooms.

Other hardy hibiscus species are grown for food or fiber as well as ornament. African rosemallow (*Hibiscus acetosella*) has become popular as a foliage color annual in plantings around the US. Kenaf (*H. cannabinus*) is grown for its stem fibers that are used for making textiles or paper. *H. sabdariffa* is a food plant with the common names of Roselle, Jamaica Sorrel, and Florida Cranberry. The main edible part is the fleshy sepal, called a calyx, that surrounds the fading flower and developing seed capsule. The ornamental calyx is bright red and acid and is used to make tea, juice, jelly or a cranberry-like sauce.

Commercial Hybrids

Crimson-eyed rosemallow (*Hibiscus moscheutos*) and several other species have been used extensively in breeding programs. These hybrids produce spectacular flowers up to 12 inches across in shades of white, pink and red. Recent breeding programs are supplanting older cultivars such as 'Disco Belle Mix' and 'Southern Belle' with more vigorous cultivars such as 'Fireball', 'Super Rose', and others. These newer cultivars tend to grow smaller and more compact than the species. The Luna™ series is exceptionally dwarf and available as a seed produced crop, while others like the 'Vintage' series are produced only by cuttings and offer new tones of deep cerise on dwarf plants. Some cultivars, such as 'Red Shield' and 'Kopper King', have been selected for their burgundy to purple foliage.

Characteristics of Hardy Hibiscus

Characteristics of selected hardy hibiscus previously evaluated in north Florida are listed in Tables 1 and 2. Other commercial cultivars include 'Anne Arundel', 'Cerise', 'Cranberry Punch'™, 'Crimson Wonder', 'Crown Jewels', 'Davis Creek', 'Flare', 'Giant Maroon', 'Pink Clouds', 'Plum Crazy', 'Raspberry Rose', 'Red Flyer', 'Robert Fleming', 'Royal Gems', 'Sweet Caroline', and many others.

Care of Hardy Hibiscus in the Garden

The major insect pest of hardy hibiscus is the caterpillar-like larva of the hibiscus sawfly, *Atomacera decepta*. Several of these larvae often feed on the same leaf or plant and can quickly defoliate the entire plant. Other pests include

whiteflies, mealy bugs, grasshoppers and spider mites. The primary diseases are various leaf spots caused by *Cladosporium*, *Cercospora*, *Phyllosticta*, and other fungi.



Figure 1. Comfortroot, *Hibiscus aculeatus*



Figure 2. Hibiscus Blue River II



Figure 3. *Hibiscus cannabinus*



Figure 4. Scarlet rosemallow, *Hibiscus coccineus*



Figure 6. Hibiscus Disco Belle



Figure 5. Neches River rosemallow, *Hibiscus dasycalyx*



Figure 7. Hibiscus Fantasia



Figure 8. Hibiscus Fireball



Figure 9. Swamp rosemallow, *Hibiscus grandiflorus*



Figure 12. Hibiscus Lord Baltimore



Figure 10. Hibiscus Lady Baltimore



Figure 13. *Hibiscus mutabilis* Rubra



Figure 11. Halberdleaf rosemallow, *Hibiscus laevis*



Figure 14. Hibiscus Super Rose



Figure 15. Hibiscus Turn of the Century



Figure 16. Crimoneyed rosemallow, *Hibiscus moscheutos*

Table 1. Characteristics of native or species forms of hardy hibiscus previously evaluated at UF/IFAS facilities.

Species/Cultivar	Common Name	Flower Color	Habit
<i>H. acetosella</i>	African rosemallow	Yellow	Upright
<i>H. aculeatus</i>	Comfortroot	Yellow	Spreading
<i>H. cannabinus</i>	Kenaf	Yellow	Mounding
<i>H. coccineus</i>	Scarlet rosemallow	Red	Very Upright
<i>H. dasycalyx</i>	Neches River rosemallow	White	Mounding
<i>H. grandiflorus</i>	Swamp rosemallow	Light pink with red eye	Very Upright
<i>H. laevis</i>	Halberdleaf rosemallow	Pink with red eye	Upright
<i>H. moscheutos</i>	Crimsoneyed rosemallow	White or pink with red eye	Upright
<i>H. mutabilis</i> Flora Plena	Flora Plena Confederate rose, Flora Plena Dixie rosemallow	White, fading to pink	Very Upright
<i>H. paramutabilis</i> Rubra	Rubra Confederate rose, Rubra Dixie rosemallow	Deep pink cerise	Upright
<i>H. sabdariffa</i>	Roselle, Jamaica sorrel, Florida cranberry	Yellow	Mounding

Table 2. Characteristics of hardy hibiscus cultivars previously evaluated at the UF/IFAS North Florida Research and Education Center, Quincy, FL.

Cultivar	Flower Color	Plant Habit
Blue River II	White	Mounding
Bordeaux	Red	Compact
Chablis	White	Compact
Cherry Brandy	Red	Compact
Cranberry Punch® (also known as 'Whit Xx')	Deep red	Compact
Disco Belle Red	Red	Upright
Fantasia	Pink with red eye	Mounding
Fireball	Red	Upright
Jazzberry Jam	Deep magenta with a red eye; edges of petals are ruffled	Upright
Kopper King	Pink with red eye (foliage is burgundy)	Upright
Lord Baltimore	Red	Upright
Luna Red	Red	Compact
Luna Swirl	"Pinwheel" appearance due to each petal shading from pink to white	Compact
Moy Grande	Rose red	Upright
Old Yella	Creamy white with red eye	Upright
Peppermint Flare	Flowers open light pink and age to white; distinctive bands of red flecking down the center of each petal	Mounding
Pinot Grigio	White with blush pink along the outer petal edges; red eye	Compact
Plum Crazy	Dark lavender-pink with a deep red eye; petals have ruffled edges	Upright
Southern Belle	"Pinwheel" appearance due to each petal shading from pink to white	Upright
Sultry Kiss	Rose red	Mounding
Summer Storm (also known as SUMMERIFIC™)	Pink with red eye	Mounding
Super Rose	Rose pink	Mounding
Sweet Caroline	Pink with dark pink eye; edges of petals are ruffled	Upright
Turn of the Century	"Pinwheel" appearance due to each petal shading from red to white	Upright