

Hibiscus - Name Of The Rose

By Dennis Hinkamp

If you don't know what art is but you know what you like, you will love hibiscus. Sometimes it is confused with a Rose-of-Sharon, which is sometimes confused with a perennial hollyhock which is sometimes called a mallow.

"Believe it or not, I have been asked to settle arguments between neighbors on the "correct" name of a plant," says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. "Is it a hibiscus or a Rose-of-Sharon?" To avoid trouble by taking sides, I look at the plant and say, in what I hope sounds like Latin, 'Why that's a Hibisc-of-course who-careseae.' As long as it blooms and looks pretty, call it whatever you want. Just don't call me to referee a disagreement."

Hibiscus is a confusing plant because it is called many other names, Goodspeed explains. It is actually a genus of over 200 different species of plants. They range in size from small trees to annuals, and are grown in tropical to warm-temperate climates such as ours.

Most hibiscus are noted for their large pink, purple, white, rose or yellow flowers, that can also come in about any imaginable combination of these colors, he says. Most of the flowers are quite large, measuring anywhere from 6 to 12 inches in diameter. Their size, color, and the fact that they bloom in the late summer, make them a favorite in many gardens.

Generally, two different hibiscus varieties grow in northern Utah--a shrub hibiscus and a perennial hibiscus, Goodspeed says. The shrub hibiscus (*Hibiscus syriacus*) is most commonly called a Rose-of-Sharon, but is also known as a shrub Althea. This shrub is a native to China and has been cultivated there and in Japan for thousands of years.

"Rose-of-Sharon is classified as a shrub or a small tree, depending upon how it is pruned or how tall it is allowed to grow," Goodspeed says. "It can reach a height of 12 feet, but normally remains in the 4 to 7 foot range. It has a spread of about 6 to 8 feet. It adapts to many soil types, but prefers a well drained, high humus soil."

The flowers on the Rose-of-Sharon are borne on the current year's growth, so the stems grown in the spring produce the fall flowers, he explains. Pruning should be done in the late winter or early spring before the plants begin to grow. Never prune in the summer or the blossoms will be greatly reduced, diminishing the beauty and purpose of the shrub.

"Use the Rose-of-Sharon as a border, in a large shrub planting or as a background plant," he suggests. "Although the flowers are spectacular, in general it is not considered to be a specimen plant. It looks better in groups or surrounded by other shrubs."

This plant has few insect or disease problems, Goodspeed says. Iron chlorosis can be a problem when it is over-watered. There are too many varieties available to list. In the spring, most nurseries and garden centers have a great selection of blossom colors.

The perennial hibiscus (*Hibiscus moscheutos*) also has large, colorful flowers, he says. Its common name is rose mallow or swamp rose mallow. It also begins blooming in mid-summer and blossoms until frost. This herbaceous perennial dies back to the ground every winter. Because it is slow to break dormancy in the spring, growers often worry that it has died during the winter. About the time they give up on it completely and decide to buy a new one, it begins to grow.

Although rose mallow can reach a height of 8 feet, it commonly only grows 3 to 5 feet high, Goodspeed adds. Although it is tall, the stems are generally sturdy enough to hold up the large blossoms, and seldom needs staking. It adapts to most soils, but prefers growing where it is well-drained and rich in organic matter.

Other plants related to the hibiscus and often confused with them, are the mallows (*Malva* var. and *Lavatera* var.), he says. These perennial plants have striking blooms like the hibiscus, and even similar foliage. Mallows look a little like a cross between a hollyhock and a hibiscus. They can vary in size from 6 inches to about 6 feet.

“In general, mallows are a little more wimpy than hibiscus, and tend to die after a few years,” Goodspeed says. “However, because they reseed, they can survive for many years in a perennial garden. The mallow plant is a bit too leggy and scruffy looking for my own taste.”

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office](#).

Utah State University Extension is an affirmative action/equal employment opportunity employer and educational organization. We offer our program to persons regardless of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age or disability.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 9 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert L. Gilliland, Vice-President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University, Logan, Utah. (EP/08-99/DF)