



## Hardy Hibiscus for Florida Landscapes<sup>1</sup>

Gary W. Knox and Rick Schoellhorn<sup>2</sup>

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 over winter 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 southeastern 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 don't overlap, but the range of forms and closely related species will vary a lot.

1. This document is ENH999, one of a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date October 10, 2005. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
2. **Gary W. Knox** Extension Specialist and Professor of Environmental Horticulture, University of Florida/IFAS, North Florida Research and Education Center, 155 Research Road, Quincy, FL 32351. **and Rick Schoellhorn** Floriculture Extension Specialist and Assoc. Professor of Environmental Horticulture, University of Florida/IFAS, Environmental Horticulture Department, 2523 Fifield Hall, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A. & M. University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Larry Arrington, Dean

*Confederate Rose*, *Hibiscus mutabilis*, is an old fashioned garden plant of the southern U.S. 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 plant. The most common form is 'Flora Plena' with double flowers, but a single-flowered form also can be found. Another cultivar of this species, *H. mutabilis*, Rubra, is a smaller statured plant (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 U.S. Kenaf (*H. cannabinus*) is grown for its stem fibers that are used for making textiles or paper. A variety of kenaf formerly known as *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'<sup>PP 13,631</sup> and 'Super Rose'. 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'<sup>PP 10,793</sup>, have been selected for their burgundy to purple foliage.

## Characteristics of Hardy Hibiscus

Characteristics of selected hardy hibiscus under evaluation in north Florida are listed in Tables 1 and 2. Other commercial cultivars include 'Anne Arundel', 'Cerise', 'Cranberry Punch'<sup>TM</sup>, 'Crimson Wonder', 'Crown Jewels'<sup>PP 11,857</sup>, 'Davis Creek', 'Flare', 'Giant Maroon', 'Pink Clouds', 'Plum Crazy'<sup>PP 11,854</sup>, 'Raspberry Rose', 'Red Flyer', 'Robert Fleming'<sup>PPAF</sup>, 'Royal Gems' and 'Sweet Caroline'.

### 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 5.** Neches River rosemallow, *Hibiscus dasycalyx*



**Figure 6.** *Hibiscus Disco Belle*



**Figure 7.** *Hibiscus Fantasia*



**Figure 8.** *Hibiscus Fireball*



Figure 9. Swamp rosemallow, *Hibiscus grandiflorus*



Figure 10. Hibiscus Lady Baltimore



Figure 11. Halberdleaf rosemallow, *Hibiscus laevis*



Figure 12. Hibiscus Lord Baltimore



Figure 13. Hibiscus mutabilis Rubra



Figure 14. Hibiscus Super Rose



**Figure 15.** Hibiscus Turn of the Century



**Figure 16.** Crimsoneyed rosemallow, *Hibiscus moscheutos*

**Table 1.** Characteristics of native or species forms of hardy hibiscus under evaluation at University of Florida/IFAS facilities.

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

**Table 2.** Characteristics of hardy hibiscus hybrids under evaluation at University of Florida/IFAS facilities.

Cultivar/Species	Flower Color	Habit	Trialing Location
Blue River II	White	Mounding	Quincy, FL
Disco Belle Series	Red, blush, pink, white	Upright	Gainesville, FL
Fantasia <sup>PP 11,853</sup>	Ruffled pink	Mounding	Quincy, FL
Fireball <sup>PP 13,631</sup>	Deep red	Upright	Quincy, FL
Kopper King <sup>PP 10,793</sup>	Pale pink	Upright	Gainesville, FL
Lord Baltimore	Red	Upright	Gainesville, FL
Lady Baltimore	Pink	Mounding	Gainesville, FL
Luna Series <sup>PPAF</sup>	Red, blush	Compact	Gainesville, FL
Moy Grande	Pink	Upright	Gainesville, FL
Old Yella <sup>PPAF</sup>	Cream with a red center	Upright	Gainesville, FL
Red Shield	Yellow	Upright	Quincy, FL
Rio Grande	Solid red	Upright	Gainesville, FL
Southern Belle	Red, blush, white, pink	Upright	Quincy, FL
Super Rose	Rose pink	Mounding	Quincy, FL
Turn of the Century	Pink/white bicolor	Upright	Quincy, FL
Vintage <sup>PPAF</sup>	Red, white, pink, blush.	Compact	Gainesville, FL