



## IN THE GARDEN

# Hibiscus...Petals of Vibrant Color!

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Evoking a sense of the tropics, the hibiscus is instantly recognizable for its trumpet-shaped, showy flowers that come in six basic hues: brown, lavender, orange, red, yellow and white. With the broad range of combinations and shades that occur naturally, plus advances in science leading to even greater variety, the color palette of possibilities for hibiscus is nearly endless!

Beyond that, the show-stopping flowers come in about any size you might desire, ranging from three to four inches for the smaller types to some larger varieties with blooms as big as a dinner plate. Developed by a horticulturalist at the San Antonio Botanical Center, the Moy Grande, or Texas Giant Hibiscus, features flowers up to 12 inches in width. Adding to the appeal, particularly for those who are sensitive to scent, the majority of hibiscus are odorless and the few varieties with any fragrance at all only have a whiff of perfume.

When you have the chance to observe a hibiscus in full bloom, you will come to appreciate why it has, according to the Society of American Florists, historically been recognized as a symbol of delicate beauty. This source reports that in Victorian times, a gentleman would give a young lady one of these flowers in acknowledgement that the recipient, like the hibiscus, was dainty and lovely. Its reputation for fragility may be due to the fact that most varieties come into flower for one day only, with their blossoms opening early in the morning and wilting later in the afternoon; however, a few types of hibiscus such as the 'Hula Girl,' an island charmer in yellow and red, remain open for two days. While the individual blooms only flourish for a short time, southern Florida



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is fortunate to boast a nearly year-round flowering season for hibiscus, which is why these lovelies are such a staple with gardeners in the Gulf Coast region.

The hibiscus is also known as a rose mallow because it belongs to a genus of flowering plants within the mallow family, *Malvaceae*, that consists of over 200 species of annual and perennial herbaceous plants, woody shrubs and small trees found in subtropical, tropical and warmer temperate regions around the world. This is fitting, since it is believed that the name, hibiscus, has its origins in the Greek term, *hibiskos*, which was given to a marshmallow plant by the ancient Greek botanist and physician Dioscorides back around the 1st century, A.D. Interestingly, hibiscus is closely related to a number of useful plants such as cotton, hollyhock, and okra, many of which resemble their colorful cousins when they flower.



One of the most popular, widely planted shrubs of the tropics, the hibiscus tends to give any garden an exotic feel. This appeal is fitting, since botanical experts believe that the hibiscus originated in China, then came to be cultivated in the South Pacific and Hawaii, and eventually was introduced in Florida. According to the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Science (UFIFAS), it is thought that the Chinese hibiscus may have been hybrids involving two or more species from areas adjacent to the Indian Ocean. In fact, UFIFAS reports that the majority of the varieties commonly grown in Florida today, which are known as *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* L., are most likely hybrids.

When you seek out hibiscus plants at a local greenhouse or nursery, you'll discover that hundreds of varieties can be found in Florida, representing the full gamut of shades and sizes. If you are wanting a bold dash of color, you will appreciate the deep-rose American Beauty; the golden yellow Old Gold; the scarlet Anderson's Double Yellow Red, also known as a Celia or Red Dragon; or the All Aglow, an orange flower with yellow spots and a pink center. For a more understated look, consider varieties such as the ivory Elephant Ear, pale yellow Hilo Island, or light pink Mary Morgan, among the many options.



Cultivating hibiscus will enhance the magic atmosphere of any garden, since they attract numerous types of butterflies like the Cloudless Sulphur, Gulf Fritillary and several varieties from the blue family of butterflies.

You may even be able to draw hummingbirds to your yard, particularly if you select varieties with red flowers. A note of caution, however: one variety, the mahoe (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*), which is native to tropical regions of Asia, has been reported by the Florida Exotic Pest Council as an invasive plant.

Given the striking beauty of hibiscus blooms, it's common to see them used in floral arrangements. When preparing one of your own, please be aware that it's not necessary to put your freshly cut flowers in water; they must, however, be kept in a reasonably cool place. If you want to display an arrangement of hibiscus flowers at an evening gathering, it's recommended that they are picked in the early morning just after opening and that they are kept refrigerated until needed.

If you find you've developed a passion for hibiscus, it may delight you to know that the American Hibiscus Society has its roots in the Sunshine State. According to the group's website, it was originally founded in 1950 in Cocoa Beach and currently has members in 40 states and 45 foreign countries with over a dozen chapters located throughout Florida. To learn more, log on to [AmericanHibiscus.org](http://AmericanHibiscus.org).