

Hardy Hibiscus



Some great new hibiscus species are now available.

By Rick Schoellhorn
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Having had a big interest in these plants for many years, it is great to see so many improvements in both seed and vegetative “hardy” hibiscus. Most growers will identify with the Disco Belle series that basically took over the market about 20 years ago and has had little competition since. Connoisseurs of the hibiscus will know about some of the great species forms floating around in the industry, and for those of you who have no idea what I am talking about we’ll do a little history and get you caught up...

The only good thing to come out of the “disco” movement in the 70s was the release of the seed-produced Disco Belle Series of hybrid *Hibiscus moscheutos*. Disco Belles grabbed the American gardener’s attention with big (12-inch) blooms, flashy colors and a feeling of success for doing very little. In garden plants these qualities are good, and Disco Belle was a great series.

WHAT’S NEW

The Vintage line of hardy hibiscus was unveiled at the OFA Short Course this summer, and there is some great new genetics here. The Vintage line is composed of the Carafe and Splash series from Yoder Brothers/Green Leaf Perennials, bred by Mark Smith. All of these plants are compact compared to the species and have greatly improved branching. The Carafe series is approximately 3 feet tall with three col-

ors: Bordeaux (deep pink-red), Chablis (pure white) and Grenache (pure pink). The Splash series, with two colors — Pinot Noir (red) and Pinot Grigio (light blush) — is the most compact, at 2-3 feet mature height and again great branching. The plants are supplied only as a rooted liner and are not dormant but vigorously growing, so bench time for the crop is significantly reduced. These series reflect major improvements on the vegetative side of this crop, with great growth habit and flowering!

The Luna series from PanAmerican Seed is a great 2003 seed-grown release with two colors: Red and Blush (white with pale pink edges and overlay). The Luna series is extremely compact (2-3 feet mature height) and uniform, with a slightly lighter green foliage than some of the old-fashioned types. For seed production this is a big improvement over Disco Belles.

Don’t forget the species of hibiscus that are less common, but no less impressive. Recently *H. acetosella* has become popular as a foliage color-annual in plantings around the United States, but there are plenty of great perennials as well. *H. grandiflora* is a native species of the Southeastern United States and has rich, fuzzy, gray-green leaves on a plant that reaches up to 15 feet high. Salt tolerant, this species also grows in brackish water directly in the tidal zones. Flowers of *H. grandiflora* are approximately 8-10 inches across and a clear soft pink color. *H. coccineus*, the swamp or marshmallow hibiscus (I love common names), is most commonly a clear red color with petals that don’t overlap, but the range of forms and closely related species will vary a



Luna Red’ (PanAmerican Seed).



Left: ‘Luna Blush’ (PanAmerican Seed); **Center:** ‘Pinot Grigio’ (Yoder Brothers); **Right:** ‘Bordeaux’ (Yoder Brothers).



Significant advancement has been made in the genetics of hibiscus to prevent growth habits such as this old variety's.

lot. If you are looking for native plant species to grow and plants with a crossover to water gardening the marshmallows are a great crop. *H. mutabilis* is an old-fashioned garden plant of the Southern United States that goes by the name 'Confederate Rose', this might be the reason it never really caught on in the North; still, this very upright, tree-like species produces 6- to 8-inch double blooms that open white and fade to pink. While a woody perennial in the South, this species still makes a very striking annual for Northern gardens. A sub-form of this species *H. mutabilis* 'Rubra' is a smaller stature plant with single (usually 4-6 inches), intense deep pink to carmine blooms.

Whether you are looking at new hybrids, old hybrids or species the main thing to remember with the hardy hibiscus is high light and generous spacing. Control stretch and growth by reducing fertility and watering as well as using PGRs. You can sell every one of these plants that has a flower on it, but customer satisfaction depends on how good a job you did producing a strong plant during the container phase of production. These

Culture Quickie: Hardy Hibiscus

Fertilization. Pay special attention to fertility. Too much and you'll be overgrown; too little and you'll have yellow foliage. In general, 150 ppm nitrogen is usually sufficient.

Watering. Normal production irrigation is fine; the finer you control watering, the better your control of height. Never let plants wilt, as they will lose lower leaves and reduce overall quality.

Media. All commercial peat lite media work fine; pH optimum is 5.5-6.3 for most cultivars.

Production temperatures. Temperatures of 65-68° F night and 75-85° F day temperatures are adequate. Cooler temperatures as flowers color up will give deeper color to the blooms.

Light level. High light (5,000+ foot-candles) or over 1,000 $\mu\text{mol}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$; low light levels result in weaker, stretched stems. Try to establish plants at higher light levels; many growers start plants in shaded locations then move to full sun and leaves scorch.

Propagation. Patented varieties aside, these hibiscus root like weeds. Take some time to develop a strong liner for pre-finished use. Semi-hardwood to softwood cuttings are used for developing liners. Many set copious amounts of seed that is easily germinated.

Crop timing. Forced hibiscus as a pre-finished crop takes 11-14 weeks. There is a lot of variability between cultivars.

Growth regulators. PGRs should be applied when there are 3-5 sets of unfolding leaves. Daminozide has been the traditional choice; use rates between 2,500-5,000 ppm. Try tank mixes with 500 ppm chlormequat chloride to strengthen the effect. Daminozide may delay flowering from 7-10 days depending on conditions. Late-crop stem elongation can become a problem. Paclobutrazol can be used as a spray or drench, but there isn't a lot of information on rates. For sprays look at 45-60 ppm and less than 1 ppm for drenches; repeat as needed. Hardy hibiscus is not particularly sensitive to sprays of paclobutrazol but very sensitive to drenches. The safest bet is a late drench as plants reach salable size.

Flowering. When plants reach flowering size and buds first begin to show color, drop temperatures to 55° F nights/65° F days to increase flower coloration. In general, first color is about 2-3 weeks before sale.

plants are tough, dramatic and hardy over most of the United States but are rarely grown at high quality due to their speed of growth and vigor.

Most people discover their first hardy hibiscus in someone else's yard because the plant has enough room to reach its full potential; containers in retail nurseries are often small and stashed away in the shrub section rather than out where their color can really help move the material. It is a market that good growers can make a lot of money in, and average growers can usually sell everything they grow. Hardy hibiscus is the ►



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vegetative matters

Figure 1. An overview of the commercially available hardy hibiscus.

Cultivar	Color	Habit	Vigor	Primary Propagation
Disco Belle	Single — cerise red, blush, pink (a sport of the blush), white	Upright	Medium	Seed
<i>H. grandiflora</i>	Single — light pink	Very upright	High	Cutting
<i>H. mutabilis</i>	Double — white fading to pink	Very upright	High	Cutting
<i>H. mutabilis</i> 'Rubra'	Single — deep pink, cerise	Upright	Medium	Cutting
Lord Baltimore	Single — deep cerise, red	Upright	High	Cutting
Lady Baltimore	Single — bright pink, deep pink center	Mounding upright	Medium	Cutting
Old Yella	Single — cream, red center	Upright	Medium	Cutting
'Blue River II'	Single — pure white	Mounding upright	Medium	Cutting
<i>H. coccineus</i>	Single — red	Upright	High	Seed/cutting
Carafe	Single — deep pink-red, pure white, pure pink	Compact	Medium	Cutting
Splash	Single — red, light blush	Compact	Medium	Cutting
Luna	Single — red, blush	Compact	Medium	Seed
'Anne Arundel'	Single — rosy pink	Upright	Medium	Cutting
Southern Belle	Red, blush, white, pink	Upright	Medium	Seed
'Fantasia'	Single — deep ruffled pink	Mounding upright	Medium	Cutting
'Giant Maroon'	Single — deep lavender	Mounding upright	Medium	Cutting
'Kopper King'	Single — pale pink with darker veins, red center	Upright	Medium	Cutting
'Rio Grande'	Single — solid red	Upright	High	Cutting
'Moi Grande'	Single — pink	Upright	High	Cutting

perfect centerpiece plant in large mixed containers and makes awesome specimen containers as well. The bigger the container, the bigger the impact they make. The biggest problem with these plants is their vigor and tendency to stretch (in a big way) when crowded or grown under lower light levels. GPN



'Chablis' (Yoder Brothers)

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Author's Note: Visit the following Web sites for more hibiscus information: <http://home.att.net/~SHA-IV/> lists species hosted by hibiscus enthusiasts and www.hibiscus-hut.com, which has a great photo section and great information.

For more information on the varieties discussed in this article, direct your inquiries to the following companies.

Yoder Brothers
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