

When I first saw them, I was amazed. That was years ago, but still, to this day, I am awed



‘Dream Catcher’ Hardy Hibiscus

when I witness their brilliant, bold beauty. Since that first encounter, Rita and I have made it a point to grow a variety of these beauties in our home landscape. Some are cold hardy, remaining outdoors year round. Each year they return, rewarding us with spectacular splendor. Others are grown as annuals, or we take them indoors during the winter.

I am referring to a flowering plant called hibiscus. Interestingly, the word hibiscus is actually the genus name given to a large group of flowering plants belonging to the

mallow family. The majority of hibiscuses are grown for ornamental value.

Hibiscuses live throughout the world. Many are native to temperate zones, while others succeed only in sub-tropical and tropical regions. Temperate zones include those geographical areas lying between the polar circles and the tropics. Obviously, temperate zones vary significantly in temperature extremes. For example, the state of Nebraska is rated USDA cold hardy as either Zone 5a or 5b; whereas, South Carolina is rated either Zone 7a or 7b. Keep in mind, the smaller the number, the colder the region. A plant deemed a hardy perennial in South Carolina may not necessarily be hardy in Nebraska.

I’ve discovered that many gardeners are somewhat confused about which hibiscuses are hardy in Nebraska and which are not. This confusion becomes more complicated when one purchases and plants a hibiscus that was actually labeled hardy. The plant grows for a year or two and then, unexpectedly, dies. When such a situation occurs, that particular hibiscus might have been labeled hardy; but, in reality, it was hardy for only southerly temperate regions and not necessarily for Nebraska. Technically, for Nebraska, it would have been more accurately labeled semi-hardy.



Tropical Hibiscus

Distinguishing between a tropical and a hardy hibiscus is easier. According to the U.S. Botanical Garden and Center for Plant Research, the principal way to determine the difference is by closely examining the leaves. Tropical hibiscus has dark-green, glossy leaves. The hardy perennial hibiscus has non-glossy, dull, medium-green, leaves.

The most common hardy, herbaceous, perennial hibiscus is *Hibiscus moscheutos*. Native to North America, it is also known as rose mallow or swamp mallow. Most varieties of hardy hibiscus we grow today were hybridized from these native plants.

Hardy hibiscus blooms are large, ranging from three to twelve inches across. The blooms are single, delicate, tissue-like, and very colorful. Colors range from white, to pink, rose and red with combinations thereof. Plant sizes vary from large to more compact. Even though hardy hibiscus plants have woody stems, they die back to the ground each winter. Hardy hibiscus begins blooming in mid-summer and continues until the first frost. Each flower lasts for only one day, but each plant can produce hundreds of flowers.



‘Brandy Punch’ Hardy Hibiscus

One striking characteristic of the hardy hibiscus plant is that it notoriously emerges late in the spring. It only begins growing when soil temperatures reach about 70 degrees F. Hardy hibiscus performs best in full sun and in rich, moist soil. It will tolerate poor soil if mulched and watered regularly.



‘Luna Red’ Hardy Hibiscus

As far as I’m concerned, this plant has it all: huge, beautiful flowers and adaptability to most soils. It’s fast growing and deer resistant. Due to its popularity and hardiness from Florida to Canada, many cultivars exist. A small number of varieties rated for Zone 4 that will succeed in Nebraska include Kopper King, Lord and Lady Baltimore, The Luna series, Plum Crazy, Robert Fleming, Brandy Punch, Dream Catcher, Fantasia, and Fireball.

Consider growing hibiscus. Whether it is hardy or tropical hibiscus, I guarantee you will be mesmerized by its stunning beauty.