

Those Marvelous Malvas!

You might say that the Malva is the flagship for the fleet of plants belonging to the Malvaceae family. Several other plants of a different genus belong to his family but it is only the Malva that is the true mallow even though those saucy relatives claim the name – such as marshmallow.

The flowers of these cousins run to type, a five-petaled, shallowly funnel-shaped or saucer-to-cup-shaped bloom. One genus, the Lavatera is difficult to discern from the Malva, although the Malva flowers have several forms with dark veining on the petals, giving them the appearance of wearing stripes.

Lavatera is usually a more delicate plant with smaller pastel flowers although some cultivars boast flowers the size of those on a hollyhock. They tend to be short-lived and more successful in Southern gardens but they can be pushed a zone if planted against a sunny wall. L. 'Barnsley, pastel pink with a deeper eye, is hardy to our zone 7.

One of the Malvas, *M. sylvestris*, is called cheeses. This plant has an edible seed pod shaped like a cheese which was eaten by folk in antiquity. It was also dubbed 'fairy cheeses'. You may judge many flower tales to be apocryphal, just an attempt to explain their curious names, but they often have an origin in the plant's medicinal use.

Another Malvaceae cousin is your grandmother's hollyhock, *Alcea rosea*, formerly known as *Althaea rosea*. Do small girls still construct dolls out of their flowers? Large and coarse-foliaged, they are country cousins which hybridizers have made much smaller to accommodate smaller city spaces. Fluffy double blooms have also made them fashionable!

Butterflies love them, as do herbalists. It was considered a healing herb, a blessed or holy herb and the 'hock' derives from Old English and means mallow. The Latin *Alcea* also derives from the Greek word for mallow.

As you may suspect, our marshmallow, *Althaea officinalis*, belongs to this clan. The marsh mallow has squishy roots that were once used to make that soft spongy confection that is now made of corn syrup, sugar, and gelatin. Originally introduced from Europe for its medicinal as well as candy uses, it now inhabits brackish spots from Connecticut to Virginia. Pretty rose pink flowers similar to those of the hollyhock give it space in a seaside garden.

I expect you know that Hibiscus is a member of this family. Some Hibiscus are trees, others bushy shrubs. One shrubby 'Frisbee' sported blooms the size of, yes, a Frisbee. Be careful where you plant this genus. The roots delve to China and are hard to remove. Our favorite is probably *H. syriacus*, called Rose of Sharon. Other plants, too, are called Rose of Sharon but we can't wander down that garden path. This dependable small tree sends seedlings which may not be true to the parent but, by replanting them, you will soon have a hedge. The colors are mostly pink, white, and rose but one called 'Blue Bird' leans toward blue.

The shrubby one, *H. moscheutos*, is the common or rose mallow noted for huge blooms – one in a glorious red 'Lord Baltimore', another in pink, 'Southern Belle'. They are admired for their shiny foliage as well. *H. mutabilis* is known as Confederate rose mallow or cotton mallow. This deep south member of the family is an evergreen small tree, 6 to 15 feet. The underside of the leaves have star-shaped hairs which makes me sorry it won't grow here, star-shaped hairs?

One of the most delightful of the Hibiscus is *H. schizopetalus* or Japanese lantern. A tall slender evergreen shrub with arching or pendent branches and ovate deep green leaves, it sports a hanging ornament of a flower of exuberant fringed petals and a dangling column of stamens. Neat!

Months ago *Hibiscus cannabinus*, Indian hemp or Kenaf, was mentioned as a potential source of bio-fuel as being cheap, a non-food, easy to grow. Hemp is a fiber grown worldwide for rope, paper, even stout fabrics. For fear of misuse, the growing of hemp was made illegal here and the law may still be on the books? With fossil fuels being non-sustainable, all options should be studied, don't you think? As a postscript, The cotton grown for cloth, *Gossypium*, belongs to the Malvaceae family as well.