



The Mallow Family **Gary Westlake**

Today we make marshmallows from sugar, water and gelatin, but they used to be made from the mucilaginous root of *Althaea officinalis*, a plant called the Marshmallow. It belongs to a large family of plants, the mallows and they are all slimy. If you crush the leaves of any of them, you get slime.

You may be surprised to find out that hibiscus, hollyhock and cotton also belong to this family. In addition to slime, these plants all have funnel-shaped flowers with five separate petals and a distinctive column of stamens in the centre.

As some of you know, the Peterborough Horticultural Society looks after Fleming Park and there we have planted some hollyhocks. Also some of them have planted themselves, if you know what I mean. This is one of the problems gardeners find with hollyhocks. They self-seed and require a lot of maintenance. We may just have to take them out of Fleming just because we do not have the manpower to look after them properly. Another problem that hollyhocks have is they are prone to rust which makes the leaves unsightly. You can make sure that they get a lot of air around them but this may not be enough to control the rust. Still, there is nothing quite like the look of hollyhocks and we get compliments on the ones in the park.

At our cottage on Rondeau Bay on Lake Erie, there are some swampy areas along the shore. Another mallow relative grows there which is a rare plant called *Hibiscus moscheutos* or the swamp rose. It has a pretty pink flower. If you are lucky you might find one or two at the edge of the bullrushes.

Many of us grow tropical hibiscus in the house, sometimes bringing them outside for the summer. I saw someone plant them in their garden as annuals and they looked great so if you can afford it, give it a try. I suspect you could clean off the roots and repot them for the winter inside. The advantage of these hibiscus is the brilliant colours. In the tropics, there are hibiscus trees that tower over you. For us, it usually is a small shrub, although I saw some quite large ones in a glass house in London England.

But you do not have to go tropical to grow the most spectacular variety of hibiscus outdoors. We can

grow the hibiscus with the largest flower here in our climate without protection. The flowers can be as large as diner plates, in pinks and reds and they bloom at the end of the season when other plants are starting to fade. They die back to the ground each winter but come back each year and form a shrub from the ground up. Do not give up on them in the spring though because they are late to surface. It is a good idea to mark them with a stake or sign so you do not dig them up by mistake. We have one with copper coloured leaves and huge white flowers with pink centres that was spectacular this year. The variety is called 'Copper King'.

A couple of weeks ago we took out some Malva which is another member of the mallow family. It grows 4-5 feet tall and just looked too messy and unruly in our garden. We have a large mess tolerance, but this one falls over, self seeds and does not seem to behave well for us. I can imagine that in some gardens it would be just perfect but not in ours.

There is an annual mallow relative called *Lavatera* that you can grow from seed in the garden and it looks great. You can also save seed from it and plant it for next year. It comes in pink and white and grows to about 18 inches tall.

Although it is quite feasible to grow Rose of Sharon in Peterborough, it is a bit tender. If you can get it in a protected spot and established before it dies on you, it is a great looking plant. We had one given to us that had three different varieties grafted together. What tends to happen in this case is one of the varieties eventually takes over but ours never got the chance because we killed it. You might have more luck gathering seed from an established one in town because this would be from an individual plant that had proven it could live in Peterborough. In our case, we have decided to stick with the larger flowered hardy variety but if we decide to move further south, we will try Rose of Sharon again.

So when you see a funnel shaped flower with a column in the middle, it is probably a member of the mallow family and you should give it a try especially the hardy hibiscus.

Previously published in the Peterborough Examiner.