

Water Hibiscus

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Water Hibiscus Flower

Water hibiscus, sometimes called swamp mallow, adds color to the late summer water garden. The flowers are large – six to eight inches in diameter - colorful- red to white and last only one day. It is a tall plant, anywhere from four to eight feet. Height varies depending on how soon it starts growing in the spring. A full sun location is best for flower color and a sturdier plant. Leaves are palmate with three to seven lobes, resembling Japanese maple foliage. Deer don't seem to like this plant but Japanese beetles do. Some years, the beetles are disappearing as the flowers begin to open so most are spared.

These moisture-loving plants are native to the southeastern US and some species are found as far north as Illinois. Those hardy in zone 5 and maybe 6 can be overwintered outdoors with extra protection. They like constantly moist soil and can grow in standing water. I keep water at or just over the top of a pot with drain holes.

I bought a red water hibiscus in the late 1990s. It had an identification tag but it is missing from my stash of tags. The plant was already three-feet tall when I purchased it. After repotting into a three-gallon nursery container, it grew taller. I placed it on the water garden shelf for late season interest and color. The wind changed my plan, blowing it over. I quickly tired of standing it up and moved it out of the water garden and into a watertight container where it spent the remainder of that first summer and every summer since. Sometimes I place it in a perennial garden, other summers near a water garden or most likely a stand-alone accent plant somewhere in the landscape or on the patio.

The one bit of information I remember from the tag was that it was hardy to zone 5 – marginally hardy here. In the fall, I cut it down and bury it in a back garden with other plants I consider marginally hardy. The area is watered heavily before it is topped with a thick layer of leaves for insulation. Other years, we cover the pot(s) with bags of leaves, making sure it is thoroughly watered. Both methods work. When I remove the plants from their winter home, most are already growing but not the hibiscus. Like

its hardy perennial relations, the water hibiscus is very slow to immerge from dormancy. Sometimes a month or more. I set it aside in a part-sun location and keep it watered. Eventually, little curly green shoots begin to grow next to last year's stocks. I fertilize when new growth is several inches tall and every four weeks until mid-August.

If it needs dividing, and it will every two to three years, the time to do that is when the new growth is about six-inches tall. Sometimes I need Dave's help with this step. We cut the pot off and 'carefully' separate the dense, thick rootstock into two or more plants using a hand axe. The new plants quickly recover from what seems like brutal treatment, growing tall and flowering the first year.

Water hibiscus is an easy plant to grow with a little special care in the fall and lots of patience in the spring. Even though mine has never grown where I originally intended, it always rewards me with many small-plate size red flowers at a time when summer-blooming flowers are waning. Each spring, I ponder, 'where will I put it this year'?



Water Hibiscus In Bloom