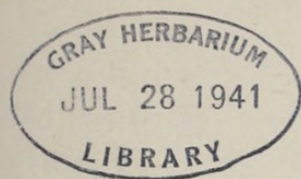


# ARNOLDIA



## A continuation of the BULLETIN OF POPULAR INFORMATION of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University

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### HIBISCUS SYRIACUS

IT was only towards the end of the last century that the native home of *Hibiscus syriacus* was determined to be China and not Syria as Loudon and others of the older writers had supposed. Bean tells us that the travels of Augustine Henry definitely placed the plant, both wild and in cultivation, in the Orient. Like the so-called Persian lilac, it had, presumably, come down over the old trade route to the Near East at some long forgotten time.

But Chinese or not, we shall probably continue to meet with such vernacular references as Syrian rose, Rose of Sharon (probably applicable by right only to some bulbous plant), or Syrian Ketmie. The older European gardeners, noticing the hollyhock-like flowers, used the everyday name of *Althaea frutex*. Being apt, this name has stayed with the plant in all sections influenced by the European tradition. Now, however, Ketmie—an old botanical name for *Hibiscus* in general—is being revived in England as a common name. That this revival looks to broader horizons may be determined by taking the word on a talking tour. It is Ketmie, or Ketmia, in English, French and German; Chetmia in Italian; Ketmi in Turkish and Khatmiyah in Arabic. Thus the *Althaea* may yet come to be known in gardens as the Syrian Ketmie.

The older estimates of the relative hardiness and particular cultural requirements of the one woody species of *Hibiscus* have lived on to misdirect us. Parkinson started some of the misunderstanding back in 1629 by rating the *Althaea* so tender that its indicated treatment was pot or tub culture with winter storage in buildings or cellars. Although, in the long years since then, Parkinson's idea has been upset,

there still remains a tendency to place an over-amount of blame for cultural failure with the *Althaea* on an exaggerated supposition of innate tenderness.

Fully as important as inherent hardiness are the factors of suitable soil and environmental conditions. Many instances of *Althaea* loss in northern United States may be traced to the literal application of recommendations of English rather than Continental horticultural writers. Philip Miller's opinion, expressed in 1768, is still being heeded to the inhibition of happy *Althaea* culture. Obviously of but local usefulness was his dictum that "they want light soil, not too wet, for in strong land their stems grow mossy and they never thrive thereafter." Somehow his plea for light, dry soil has too often prompted planting in parched, gravelly hillsides in America. Or, as it is sometimes put, "*Althaeas* need to be put on the driest spot on the place".

The cultural directions set down in nineteenth century France are much more adaptable for our use. Abel Carrière recognized that, while the woody *Hibiscus* wants full sun and can sometimes endure drought or extreme wet, what it really desires is a deep, amply watered soil. His definite advice was strict attention to the watering of plants established in dry places. Personal experience in New England has shown that it is usually less disastrous to err on the wet side in selecting sites for *Althaea* planting. The influence of environmental factors such as these will be reflected directly in the size of the leaves and in the general aspect of the plants while in growth.

Another truth expressed in the French literature, and known to numerous plantsmen in this country, is that winter injury strikes chiefly at young, quick-growing plants. Unless such striplings are protected heavily or taken up and stored for the first winter or so, they cannot be expected to develop size and structure in proportion to their age in the cold north. This killing back or freezing out is not to be expected with older, slower-growing plants. These last may have some twigs frozen but, since the *Althaea* flowers on new wood, such injury is usually superficial. Thus, the *Althaeas* should be introduced into northern gardens in Spring in the form of plants which are old enough and large enough to have developed winter-resistant tops. After planting, their leaves may be very slow in unfolding. Many newly set plants have been so deliberate about showing new growth that they have been given up, erroneously, for dead.

In planting newly purchased *Althaeas*, whether trained as bushes or standards, pruning should follow the practice of removal of whole branches. By this process of thinning, as opposed to severe lopping

back of all upper branches, size of plant is not reduced, more old, weather-resistant branches are retained and fewer winter-tender shoots are induced. Routine pruning of established plants can proceed, when necessary, on this same basis. Pruning of old plants usually need consist of nothing more than the removal of dead wood in spring.

Propagation of the *Althaea* by either leafy or hardwood cuttings is a relatively simple process. However, in the light of the above discussion of tenderness of young plants, it seems prudent to limit its use in northern gardens to the increasing of individual forms not available in the trade.

Although eighteenth century gardeners often grew *Althaeas* from cuttings or layers, they much preferred two other methods of propagation. For increase of the variegated-leaved sorts, they chose to graft on seedling understocks. Strangely enough, *Althaeas* are still being so grafted in this country. Most usually, they grew their plants from seed. By so doing, they had bushes large enough for setting in permanent locations by the end of the fourth year. From the lack of records of introduction, it is reasonable to assume that all of the named forms of *Althaea* are but chance products of this practice, selected out and preserved by alert, but now unknown, gardeners.

While Parkinson noted but two or three varieties, Miller and Hanbury, about a hundred years later, recorded forms with pale purple, dark purple, white, pale yellow and red flowers. Also listed were two forms with variegated leaves. In all of these, the flowers were single and had dark-blotched petal bases. Out of the lot one of the purples might be picked as representing the type flower. As time went on more selections were made, particularly in France at such places as the nursery of Simon-Louis Frères.

With this increase in the number of garden forms, a strange evolution in their names took place. Instead of the simple color designations of the older authors, the nineteenth century knew such varieties as *H. s. flore luteolo pleno*, *H. s. flore roseo striato simplice*, *H. s. flore albo pleno* and others with equally unmanageable Latin descriptions for names. Fortunately, we are today confronted only by simple, obvious garden names, some of which are commemorative and others arrived at by anglicizing of older names. In some known, and probably other uncertain cases, the newer names were bestowed on well-known old forms by rechristening.

Of the newer *Althaeas* now available, a reasonably representative selection could be had by securing the following varieties: In white there are "Totus Albus" (sometimes called "Snowdrift" or "Snow-

storm"), a pure white single; "Jeanne d'Arc" (identical to the old *H. s. flore albo pleno*), a double pure white and "Anemonaeflorus," semi-double with dark center. Red varieties are "Rubis," single, and "Duc de Brabant," dark double. "Ardens" is double lavender-violet. "Boule de Feu" is violet-red. "Coelestis" ("Celeste") is single, purplish blue in flower color. About the nearest to pink in Althaeas are "Lucy," semi-double and "Amplissimus," double. Many others are offered including the hardly desirable variegated-leaved sorts and the varieties with striped petals.

Most of the garden value of *Althaea* centers around its habit of flowering late in the summer when few other shrubs are in bloom. This important contribution to garden interest was not appreciated by the gloomy old author in Curtis' Botanical Magazine when he wrote that "we view it, however, with less delight, as it is a sure indication of approaching winter." While the flowering season often hangs over into the autumn, the leaves of the *Althaea* do not put on any kind of distinct fall coloration. One other seasonal property of the *Althaea* was pointed out by E. Jouin, a French nurseryman. He studied his favorite varieties and was able to classify them as being early, mid-season or late in their relative times of flowering. Of those mentioned above, M. Jouin rated "Coelestis" as early-flowering, "Totus Albus" as mid-season and "Jeanne d'Arc" as coming later than either of the other two.

GEORGE GRAVES

Massachusetts Horticultural Society

### Notes

**Plants from England.** Even with all the difficulties concerning shipping on the North Atlantic these days, the Arnold Arboretum recently received a shipment of live woody plants from Hillier's nursery in England. This was the fulfilment of a normal order placed early in the spring. There were about 100 plants altogether representing fifty different kinds, and though they were en route nearly a full month, they arrived in fair condition and all but four of them will live. None of these plants are represented in living American collections.

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Dr. E. D. Merrill, Administrator of Botanical Collections and Director of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University, has recently been elected an honorary member of the Royal Agricultural Society of India.

DONALD WYMAN



Graves, George. 1941. "Hibiscus syriacus." *Arnoldia* 1(8), 41–44.

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