PLANT LIFE COLUMN

HIBISCUS

_Hibiscus_ flowers are symbolic of tropical paradise. Use them to add a touch of the tropics to your patio or landscape. There are many varieties of hibiscus available in local nurseries. They are thought to be native to the warmer parts of China, but probably arrived here first through trade routes with Hawaii and the South Pacific. The word hibiscus is both singular and plural so don't try to find hibiscus in your dictionary.

Hibiscus are an ideal way to add landscape color during our warm weather. Individual hibiscus flowers are only open for a day and close at night but the flowering season lasts throughout our warm weather. I have cut the flowers in the morning and held them in the refrigerator until evening so they last for night time party decorations. Flower color and type vary tremendously as breeders keep trying to improve and expand the color and petal shapes. Yellow, white, orange, red and lavender are the most popular colors with many color combinations possible. Hibiscus flowers may be a single layer of 5 petals or a mass of ruffled petals. Plant form ranges from dwarf, low growing shrubs to 20' hedge plants.

Hibiscus plants make great patio plants and can be grown in a variety of container sizes. They are often trimmed into shrubs but can also be trained into a single trunk tree shape called a standard. Be aware that this tropical plant is susceptible to frost damage and freeze to the ground at about 30°F, so plant them in a protected location if you put them outdoors in the landscape. Containerized plants can be moved indoors for brief periods of protection but the bigger the pot, the more the muscle needed to move them. Consider this when you get excited about planting lots of them.

Full sunlight is important for the best bloom display. Shady locations produce spindly plants with few blossoms. Hibiscus prefer slightly acidic soils that are well drained. Our native sandy soils work well if adequate fertilizer and water is applied. Being tropical plants, they don't really take a winter rest and need 3 to 4 applications of granular fertilizer per year. Use a general garden fertilizer or bloom special in early spring, after the first flush of new growth, during the summer rainy season and again late September. These plants benefit from a good weekly soaking to wet the soil about 12 inches deep, especially during our hot dry weather. A 3” to 4” layer of organic mulch helps conserve water. As the mulch decomposes, it helps to maintain the soils acidity for best fertilizer availability.

Plants grown next to the house or in high pH soil conditions have yellow patches between the leaf veins due to nutrient deficiency. Correct the soil pH before planting hibiscus to avoid long term problems.

Hibiscus are prone to aphid damage on the new growth. Aphids are small sucking insects that feed on the tender new leaves and flower buds. There are many natural controls including lady bugs and lace wings. Sometimes a spray of water will disturb them from their lunch room but you may need to use insecticidal soap or horticultural oil to get the problem under control. Always read and follow label directions when using chemicals.

Since some hibiscus grow quite large, it is best to schedule heavy pruning in the early spring, by the end of February to allow the new growth to develop blossoms. Do not prune in fall or winter or you encourage tender shoots which are more prone to cold damage.

The flowers are produced on the new growth so you don't want to do a lot of pruning during the growing season or you postpone the beautiful flower display. Light pruning of a few branches to keep them in bounds should not have a major impact on flowering.

The best way to avoid the need for major pruning is to select varieties that grow to the desired height. Consult with local nurseries or request our hibiscus fact sheet for some guidance.
Hibiscus is a great plant for summer color when given proper care. Plant some to add to your tropical paradise.

Contact the Osceola Master Gardeners for information on care of hibiscus and other landscape plants by calling (321) 697-3000. They are available in the office on Mondays to Fridays from 10 am to 2 pm.

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