

hibiscus foliage can occur when insecticides are applied.

### Failure to Bloom

One of the most common questions is, “Why don’t my plants bloom?” Here are a few possibilities:

- improper irrigation management (too wet, too dry, irregular watering)
- too much shade
- excessive nitrogen fertilization
- root system is not restricted
- thrip or similar insect damage to flower buds

### Related Species

Several other hibiscus are common to Louisiana landscapes. One of the other popular hibiscus species is althea, also called Rose of Sharon. **Althea** (*Hibiscus syriacus*) has limited flower performance, but is a great plant to withstand our winter growing conditions. It also makes a nice background plant in a landscape bed. New varieties that have improved flower performance are available.



**Rose mallow** (*Hibiscus moscheutos*) is common along roadsides and ditchbanks in Louisiana. It has been hybridized to have flowers that are up to a foot across.

Another favorite hibiscus is **Texas star hibiscus** (*Hibiscus coccineus*). It is similar in appearance (at least the foliage) to marijuana. Flowers are bright red on tall stems. It flowers less prolifically than tropical hibiscus.

**Confederate rose** (*Hibiscus mutabilis*) is popular in south Louisiana. Plants can reach 15 to 20 feet tall. The woody stems usually do not die back during winters unless severe conditions are present. Flowers of Confederate rose begin the day as white. By early afternoon, the flowers are light pink, and by evening, flowers are a rosy pink.

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Pub. 2662 (3M) 7/2000 Rep.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. The Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

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**Tropical hibiscus** (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) is one of the most popular plants used in Louisiana and along the Gulf Coast. Summers in Louisiana are warm and humid, perfect conditions for growth of these tropical plants. With proper care, hibiscus can provide almost non-stop blooming from spring through the fall. They can be used in landscape beds or as container-grown plants. Few plants will surpass tropical hibiscus for size, color and flower beauty. As its name suggests, tropical hibiscus is not cold hardy. Protect from temperatures below 45 degrees F.

## Soil and Bed Preparation

If planting tropical hibiscus in a landscape bed, provide a soil pH between 6.5 to 6.8. This is a slightly acid soil. Soil pH can be increased by using dolomitic lime and decreased by using elemental sulfur or aluminum sulfate.

As with most ornamental plants, make sure the soil is well drained. Most native soils in Louisiana are clay-type and typically poorly drained. Amend clay-based soils with sand and organic matter (pine bark, peat moss, etc.). Always conduct a soil test before amending the landscape bed area and after amending the area.

## Planting Location

Tropical hibiscus needs a sunny location for optimum flowering and performance. Generally, 6 to 8 hours of full (direct) sun daily are optimum. The more

sun exposure your hibiscus receives, the more irrigation (supplemental watering) will be needed. If plants start getting very large by late summer, afternoon shading may slow the watering requirement.

## Container Culture

Container culture is ideal for tropical hibiscus. In fact, this is how most of them are enjoyed in our landscapes. Many varieties may also bloom better if somewhat rootbound. Be sure to provide enough water and fertilizer. Containers can be placed on a patio, around the swimming pool, along the driveway or in a landscape bed. As winter approaches, bring plants indoors or maintain in a protected area to enjoy next year.

## Irrigation

The biggest problem you'll face when growing hibiscus, especially in containers, is drying out. Flower bud drop, sudden foliage decline and excessive yellow of leaves are signs of excessive drying of the soil or container medium. Hibiscus in pots

will need lots of water during the hottest days of summer. It's also a good idea to use a water-soluble fertilizer in combination with irrigation.

## Fertilization

Tropical hibiscus needs potassium fertilizer. This is important, in addition to a regular source of nitrogen. Use two to three times more potassium than nitrogen. A good fertilizer ratio for hibiscus is 12-4-18 or a "high bloom" water-soluble fertilizer. Slow-release granular fertilizers, like Osmocote, can be used in combination with water soluble fertilizer when irrigating.

Magnesium sulfate, also called Epsom salt, gives hibiscus foliage a good dark green color. Add at the rate of one tablespoon per gallon of pot size to pots on a monthly schedule during the growing season. You can also spray magnesium sulfate on the foliage at the rate of one tablespoon per gallon of water. Epsom salt does not change the soil pH. It is considered pH neutral.

## Insects

Several insects can be serious pests on hibiscus. These include thrips, aphids, spider mites, whiteflies and scale. After positive identification, treat with the recommended insecticide. Insecticidal soap and dormant/summer horticultural oil sprays also are recommended. Some damage to

