



Hardy Hibiscus Create a Tropical Feeling in Your Garden

by Dorothy M. Downing, UC Master Gardener

The hardy hibiscus is an amazing little perennial shrub with huge, flamboyant blossoms that will add a tropical feel to the garden. The mature plant is less than 4 feet tall and 3 feet wide, and in the summer it is covered with huge colorful blossoms that are up to 10 inches wide. Unlike other hibiscus, frost protection is not required because it is frost tolerant to -30 degrees Fahrenheit.

Last summer, the Masters Gardeners took a field trip to Fleming's Flower Fields, a developer of the hardy hibiscus. Growing grounds were recently established in Lindsay because the propagators got very tired of the bitter cold winters of Lincoln, Nebraska, their original headquarters. When we walked into the facility, several tables displayed 3-foot tall plants with big bright flowers, totally covering the foliage. Every one of us asked "What is THAT?"

We soon found out that these incredible plants were **hardy** hibiscus. Not like the hibiscus that most of us grow as annuals or house plants in the valley; nor the subtropical hibiscus that grows freely in coastal Southern California winters, but dies when the thermometer drops to 30 degrees in the valley; and definitely not the hibiscus that can turn into a tropical tree.

The best known hardy hibiscus hybrid is "Kopper King". This stunning hibiscus has magnificent white flowers that reach a full foot in diameter with bright reddish pink streaks towards the center. Its foliage is equally unique. "Kopper King" has finely-cut, copper-colored leaves, making it decorative in the garden, even when it is not in bloom.

"Strawberry Swirl" has blossoms that measure 12 inches, with swirls of pink and white around a center of dark ruby red. It has medium green leaves and grows up to 4 feet tall and 3 feet wide.



Fleming's Hardy Hibiscus 'Kopper King'



Fleming's Hardy Hibiscus 'Crown Jewels'

"Crown Jewels" is one of the smallest plants, growing only 2½ feet tall. It has dark, very refined, maple-shaped leaves and yellowish buds. They open into 8" creamy white flowers with a slightly streaking red center, making this plant the garden jewel.

The hardy hibiscus was hybridized by crossing two species of hibiscus, which are both wetland plants

and natives of the U.S. In addition to creating a water-wise (low water need) plant from a



Fleming's Hardy Hibiscus 'Strawberry Swirl'

wetland plant, the Flemings also developed the first yellow and purple flowers in the species, a plant with cold hardiness to -30 degrees F., and new leaf shapes and colors. The hardy hibiscus plants like full sun and will tolerate drought once established. They are also flood tolerant.

These plants grow in most any kind of soil, but if the soil is sandy, add at least 50% soil mix. Blend the soil mix and the native soil together very well. When you plant, make sure all the roots are covered, but don't get any soil on the stem. Water well, but do not water again until the soil is dry to the touch. Once the shrub is well established, continue with a watering schedule of drying the soil down 4 to 6 inches before watering again. The tap root can reach down 10 feet in its search for water.

These plants require little fertilizer unless they are grown in pots. The addition of compost or humus to plants in the ground will provide the micronutrients they need. They are typically pest free; although some beetles think the flower buds are a treat. If aphids, whiteflies or mealybugs show up, the plant may need more sun or less water.

The shrubs are deciduous and new growth can be very slow to emerge in spring, sometimes not sprouting until late May or early June. However once growth starts, these plants grow quite rapidly. They begin blooming in mid-summer and will often continue until frost. The deep throated flowers are particularly attractive to hummingbirds. A delightful benefit!

Pictures Courtesy of Flemings' Flower Fields

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