

Norm's Notes

The Horticulture of Summer's Hollyhocks

An old-fashioned flower, and girls making flower dolls is what comes to mind when most people think of hollyhocks. Old-fashioned is usually a synonym for dependable, which hollyhocks certainly are. And a garden with nothing but hollyhocks can easily be spectacular. But dependability and beauty are not the only reasons for growing this best tall flower for Montana.

Today hollyhocks come in a huge spectrum of colors, excluding blue. Lavendar, dark maroon, and a huge array of bi-colors are not uncommon while peach and rusty colors are more recent and fashionable. Double flowered hollyhocks are as common today as the single hibiscus-like flowers. The common five to six foot plants are now marketed with short varieties that will likely never need staking. The bloom season is nearly six weeks generally beginning just past mid-summer. The flowering stalks can even make a fair cut flower if they are picked in the cool morning and the stalks are immediately placed in a vase of warm water. Otherwise the top of the stalk will wilt. Only a few decades ago hollyhocks were largely considered biennials. Today, they commonly live for three years after which they should probably be killed since a four year old plant usually lacks much vigor. An exception is double flowered varieties; they usually behave as biennials.



Single Hollyhocks



Another grouping of single hollyhocks.

Though sometimes seen growing in the poor soils of a back alley these hardy Zone 2 plants still prefer deep, rich, moist soil and usually some mulch protection for their first winter rest. It is not uncommon to find hollyhock roots plumb to a 30 inch depth. Certainly, the deeper and richer the soil the taller and broader the plant will become. In such favorable situations a 7-8 foot height is not uncommon. Still, a 16 inch soil depth seems adequate for this plant. Hollyhocks prefer full sun (though partial shade is acceptable) with about an 18 inch spacing between plants.

The most common problems with this plant are crown root rot and rust infestations. With the former, the root at the soil line rots usually in the spring with the re-occurring freeze/thaw cycles. This can be avoid by placing a leaf mulch over first year plants and removing the mulch when spring's new leaves begin to push up and through the mulch. Rust, which is a spotty brown fungal infection on the underside of the leaves can be avoided by picking off the infected leaves, or to spray the underside of the leaves with an all purpose fungicide if the infection has spread over much of the plant. Sometimes caterpillars will reside under the leaves and curl those leaves. But again those leaves can usually be picked off and the rest of the plant will remain untouched. Another problem after several generations of plants is that the rich and varied colors of flowers will fade to white and a mousy pink. This

can be avoided by cutting white and light pink flower stalks before they go to seed, or better yet to kill white and light pink flowering plants as soon as they begin to bloom. Collecting seed only from darker colored flowers certainly also helps. Still another solution is to occasionally seed dark maroon hollyhock flowers among your other hollyhocks to boost the color intensity of subsequent generations. An exception of color decay is if you are only growing one color of hollyhocks; then the colors and offspring remain stable indefinitely.

Unless you seed hollyhocks where they will bloom in their second year, you can seed anytime from when the soil is workable in the spring to the end of July. However, if you seed them in a temporary seeding area from where they will be transplanted in their second year, the seeding should be done in the last week of June or the first week of July in Montana. The reason for this is that typically hollyhocks first grow a deep taproot. By late October the taproot can grow to over 16 inches deep. And if you break this taproot in transplanting, you will likely lose the plant. So with a comparatively late seeding, the plant will not grow such a deep taproot that it cannot be successfully transplanted. Though transplanting can be done in the first week of September on a cool and cloudy day, spring works much better. In the spring transplanting is done when the plants have developed a healthy new growth of 2-6 leaves. Again, remember to cover first year plants with a leaf mulch in the late autumn.

When it comes time to collect seed, gather the seed only from pods that have opened up to expose the seed. Gather the seed only of your favorite colors, understanding that if there has been cross pollination among colors, you will not always get only your most desired colors in the offspring. Understand, too, that if you have grown double flowers with singles, you will likely only get single flowered offspring. Double flowered offspring can only be propagated from seed if the plants have no single flowered varieties nearby. Fortunately, purchased seed is easily found in most seed packet displays. For newer color varieties, you may have to search out seed catalogs or the internet.

In the autumn, do make sure that you cut the flower stalks to within about 3-5 inches of the ground. Left uncut, the stalks will sway in the winter winds and rock and injure the roots.



A grouping of double hollyhocks.



Hollyhocks used in a streetscape.



Hollyhocks in context with toadflax in foreground and orach in background



Double apricot hollyhocks

All photographs courtesy of the author,
Norm DeNeal
Butte Garden Study Group
Montana Federation of Garden Clubs