

Technical Report

Wetland Flora



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Marsh Hibiscus

Rose Mallow / Swamp Cotton

Hibiscus moscheutos L.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Marsh hibiscus is a tall (0.5 to 1.2m - 3 to 7 ft.), leafy perennial, frequently found in freshwater marshes or on the margins of swamps or other wooded wetlands. The most distinctive characteristic of this plant is the large, showy, white (occasionally pink) flowers, often 10 to 15 cm (4 to 6 inches) wide, with dark red centers and densely compacted, yellow stamens. This robust plant is seldom noticed until it blooms from mid-July through early September. The solitary flowers are borne in the axils of the leaves.

Hibiscus moscheutos is also distinctive in winter, when most herbaceous vegetation has decomposed. The erect, leafless stalks are characteristically adorned with one to several large gray-brown seed capsules. These stalks usually persist until late spring to early summer when new, leafy shoots are rapidly growing. The plant is a perennial and propagates by both seeds and rhizomes.

The leaves are arranged alternately on the stem, are smooth above and velvety or felt-like underneath and have serrated edges. The relatively large leaves are from 10 to 20 cm (4 to 6 inches) long and 6 to 8 cm (2 to 4 inches) wide.

Hibiscus belongs to the mallow family (Malvaceae), as does the commercial cotton plant. Marsh hibiscus is similar to cotton when in bloom and is sometimes called swamp cotton; however, it does not develop balls as does its domesticated relative.

Seashore mallow or marsh mallow (*Kosteletzkya virginica*) is another species of the mallow family which grows in brackish and freshwater tidal marshes. The marsh mallow flower is similar to *Hibiscus moscheutos*, but is smaller (1 to 3 inches wide) and is pink rather than white. The plant itself is only about half as tall as marsh hibiscus.

Distribution

Marsh hibiscus ranges from Maryland to southern Indiana and south to Texas.

Habitat

Hibiscus moscheutos is common in tidal freshwater marshes along the Mid-Atlantic Coast. In nontidal wetlands, it appears to prevail in marshes, ditches, scrub-shrub wetlands and in open wooded wetlands that are at least saturated or seasonally flooded. This species may be less frequently found in brackish marshes near the upland border where freshwater seepage dilutes salty conditions.

In scrub-shrub wetlands, hibiscus is commonly found associated with such shrubs as silky- (*Cornus amomum*) or stiff- (*C. foemina*) dogwood, button-bush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) and/or alder (*Alnus serrulata*). Smartweeds (*Polygonum* spp.), water-willow (*Decodon verticillatus*), wild rice (*Zizania aquatica*), ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*) and other hydrophytes are commonly associated with hibiscus in tidal freshwater marshes.

Ecological Values/Benefits

Hibiscus moscheutos is found in a wide variety of wetland types, both tidal and nontidal.

Freshwater tidal riverine wetlands of the Chesapeake Bay watershed are substantiated spawning and nursery areas for anadromous fishes, such as herring and shad. They are also habitats for various species of wildlife and waterfowl.

Nontidal wetlands function as natural filters of high nutrient loads which often originate from farm fields, as well as sediment runoff, pesticide and herbicide residues and other potential toxins. They also serve as a wildlife habitat, and in many cases waterfowl habitat as well.

Hydrophytic Factor/Federal Delineation

According to the *Federal Manual for Identifying and Delineating Jurisdictional Wetlands* and the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia*, *Hibiscus moscheutos* is classified as an **obligate wetland plant (OBL)**. OBLs are plants that almost always occur in wetlands (99% probability).

Hibiscus moscheutos L.



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