

## Old-Fashioned Beauty: Rose of Sharon

By Susan Camp

August has arrived and we are being blasted by heat and humidity. The early and midsummer flowers have faded. The crape myrtles are providing superb color this year, but they can't do it alone.

Now is the time to explore options to increase late summer color and interest for next year. Many beautiful shrubs and small trees that produce colorful blossoms in late summer and early fall are available for fall planting. Some are native plants and some are exotics introduced for their ornamental interest. My husband and I have been examining the merits and pitfalls of several flowering shrubs reputed to have few serious disease and pest problems. Over the next few weeks I will share with you some information about these attractive, interesting plants.

I grew up in military housing and suburban subdivisions, yet I have great nostalgia for vacations spent at the homes of relatives who lived in the country. My grandmother and several aunts and uncles raised gorgeous, colorful flowers and I still love old-fashioned plants like irises and gladioli and traditional shrubs like hydrangea.

One of my favorite shrubs from childhood is Rose-of-Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*), sometimes called shrub althea. Despite its proper name, Rose-of-Sharon is not native to Syria, but to Korea, China, and India. First introduced to Britain in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, it arrived in the American colonies by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Rose-of-Sharon is a member of the mallow family (along with okra). It is a hardy, deciduous, upright shrub. Branches have a loose, spreading appearance and light to dark green leaves. Some varieties of Rose-of-Sharon can reach heights of 8 to 10 feet with spreads of 4 to 10 feet. The branches look ungainly and can break if left unpruned. Fall leaf color is unexceptional.

The beauty of Rose-of-Sharon lies in its large, showy flowers which resemble hollyhocks. Single or double flower colors include white, pink, red, lavender, purple, and blue. The blooms appear in late summer through fall when few other flowers are blooming. Each blossom bears a large eye of a contrasting color.

Rose-of-Sharon is hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 5B through 9A. It requires full sun to part shade and any moist to dry sandy, loam, or clay soil with a pH of 3.7 to 7.3. Good drainage is a requirement. The shrub can be planted in the fall or spring. It transplants easily and can be propagated from softwood cuttings.

Rose-of-Sharon blooms on new wood, so prune in early spring. Pruning recommendations are to cut shrubs back to two to three buds per branch to encourage fewer, larger flowers. Unpruned shrubs will produce smaller and more numerous flowers. The wood is brittle, so damaged, diseased, and old wood should be removed promptly.

Add a layer of compost in the spring and cover with mulch. Water the shrubs if summer rainfall is less than one inch per week. Rose-of-Sharon is deer resistant and drought, humidity, salt, and pollution tolerant.

Few pests and diseases seriously affect Rose-of-Sharon. Aphids can attack new plantings, causing deformity of branch tips. Spider mites, white flies, and Japanese beetles sometimes invade Rose-of-Sharon. Occasional diseases include leaf spot and canker.

Some varieties of Rose-of-Sharon will self-sow, producing unwanted seedlings. Triploid varieties developed in the 1970's and 1980's are smaller and more compact with dark green leaves and waxy blossoms. They produce few, if any, viable seeds. These varieties include 'Diana', 'Aphrodite', 'Helene', and 'Minerva'.

Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication 2901-1066 "Rose-of-Sharon, Shrub Althea", U.S. Forest Service Fact Sheet ST-295 "Hibiscus syriacus: Rose-of-Sharon", and the U.S National Arboretum Plant Introduction Publication "'Aphrodite', 'Helene' and 'Minerva' Rose-of-Sharon" provide information on this lovely, easy to grow, old-fashioned shrub.

#### Revisiting Butterflies

Last Friday I was finally able to snap a photo of a big, beautiful black swallowtail on the butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) in the garden. They don't like to sit still for photo ops!

August 11, 2016