

Clippings

A weekly column about plants, yards & gardens

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Hollyhock: An Old-Fashioned Flower

Hollyhocks are a classic flower. They seem to have fallen out of popularity with the younger generation of gardeners. To them hollyhocks are mostly remembered as that flower their grandma grew on the farm. However, in recent years, hollyhocks have experienced a renewal of interest. I for one am very happy about this. I have long been a fan of hollyhocks. As a child, I remember looking up at these towering six foot flowers growing alongside our house. I admired their beauty and stature.

My mom has always grown hollyhocks. One day, as we were looking over our garden beds, I asked her why she always planted hollyhocks wherever we lived. She told me about the summers she and her sister spent at their grandmother's farm as kids. Surrounding the vegetable garden was a fence lined with red-flowered hollyhocks. Since then, she has had a great fondness for the flowers. Mom smiled as she told me about making 'hollyhock dolls' as a child; a craft she passed on to me and my sisters. Hollyhock dolls are made by using an unopened flower bud for the head. The 'head' is then attached to the stem of a fully opened blossom that, when inverted, serves as the skirt.

Hollyhocks are in the same family as hibiscus. They are biennials meaning they require two years to complete their life cycle. During the first year, hollyhocks establish their roots and grow a rosette of leaves at their base. In the second season, their flowers emerge. Growing hollyhocks is fairly easy. There are many cultivars and heirloom varieties to choose from. You can direct seed them in spring or late summer to produce flowering plants the next year. You need only plant them once as they freely reseed. Hollyhocks also cross pollinate easily so if you have several varieties grouped together, new plants may look different from the originals planted.

Plant hollyhocks in a sunny location and allow enough space between plants for good air circulation. Place in a sheltered area out of the way of strong winds. Hollyhocks are tolerant of most soil types but do need well-drained soils. Staking may be required for the taller forms. Short form cultivars are available that work well for cut flowers. Remove dead leaves as needed and prune out old flower stalks that are past their prime.

Hollyhocks were often used to hide unsightly areas in the yard such as the outhouse. Today gardeners commonly use them as a backdrop for other plantings. Traditional hollyhocks have single spikes but double forms are available. Flowering usually begins in early summer and continues for many weeks. Blooms come in a multitude of colors. You can find them in classic white as well as various shades of purple, red, pink and yellow. Flowers can also be bicolor. Their large and colorful blooms have made hollyhocks a favorite of bees and butterflies.

Hollyhocks do encounter some disease and pest problems. Rust is the most common disease to afflict them. This fungal disease starts on the lower leaves then progresses upward. Symptoms begin with small brown lesions appearing on the stems and yellow to orange spots occurring on the top side of the leaves. Following this are the formation of brown, pinhead- sized pustules on the underside of infected leaves. Spores are released from the pustules and can be splashed or windblown on to neighboring hollyhocks creating new infections. Wet conditions are favored by the fungus so avoid wetting the foliage when watering. Instead water the soil around the plant.

The best control for rust is to eliminate infected leaves as soon as symptoms are noticed. Remove badly infected plants and destroy them once flowering is finished. Clean up all fallen debris especially in the fall as rust will overwinter on plant remains. Also remove any mallow weeds in the hollyhock bed since they can harbor the fungus. Fungicides can be used for preventative control in severe cases. Treatment must be done at the first signs of infection and continued as directed on the product label. For more information on rust see the University of Minnesota Extension Service's publication titled "Hollyhock Rust"

Throughout the Midwest, hollyhocks are associated with being grown on farms. Since their flowers carry the meaning of 'fruitfulness and abundance'; perhaps they are grown as a good luck charm. For questions, please feel free to contact me at my email mmurphy@iastate.edu, by phone at (712) 754-3648 or through your local County Extension office.