

ALTHEA, SHRUB ALTHEA or ROSE-OF-SHARON

Hibiscus syriacus

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Althea, Shrub althea or Rose-of-Sharon is another plant native to China, that does well over a wide range of North America in hardiness zones 5 -9. It has been grown in India, Japan and Europe since the 16th century. It was first thought to be native to the Middle East -- thus the species name syriacus. There are hundreds of cultivars; many vary by only small differences in flower features. Growth is rapid and flowering is best in sun but tolerates some shade and grows in most soils as long as some moisture is available. Flowering is on new growth and typically begins early summer and continues until growth is slowed by cool weather.

There has never been a red flowered althea. Flowers of old cultivars are white, lavender, light or dark pink. The only red in flowers in a seedling population is confined to a small area in the center. Efforts to create a red flowered cultivar using conventional breeding have all fallen short.

Althea often gets a bad rap in gardening publications because each flower only lasts one day, and can make a mess on a patio or sidewalk. Most current cultivars are open and loose and foliage by midsummer is yellowish and no longer an attractive green. Likewise, conventional althea get large and gangly as a shrub often reaching 8 to 10 feet tall and 10 feet or more in width if left unpruned. Some althea cultivars may be trained as a small tree, reaching 20 feet with age.

On the other hand, through 25 years of plant breeding and seedling selection, we now have cultivars with dark green foliage throughout the growing season, profuse flowering and flowers approaching red. There are on the horizon new semi dwarf cultivars, more tidy shrub forms as well as tree forms. New althea should have a place in every garden as they are amazing show-offs.