

Wild hibiscus flowers are stunning!

by Jim Seeden

When you walk the trails of the thorny brush country you expect to see interesting things, but now and then, you see something that's beyond your expectations. Such a sight is the flower on a small shrub we call a heart-leaved hibiscus. The vivid color defies description but I'll try. (No picture does it justice.)

Basically it's crimson but that's just a variation of red. Artists refer to the clarity of a color and also to its saturation. This color, to my eye, is both exceptionally clear and fully saturated. In fact, it seems to have an intensity which could only come from an inner glow and not just be the reflection of light. The color is alive and, when you first see one,



stops you in your tracks to stand and ponder the wonder of its incredible brilliance.

The plants on which these flowers are found are also called tulip del monte or mountain rose-mallow. To avoid any confusion, the scientific name is *Hibiscus martianus*. Whatever you call it, it's a stunning addition to any landscape or flower garden. It's native here and so doesn't demand any special care and it blooms well all summer and into the fall and winter if there's a little rain. We had a plant here at the ranch that had 18 blossoms open on one day in December. Wow!

The plants have a woody base; they're perennial small shrubs. They typically grow to be about 3 feet tall but the ones I've seen in the wild seldom grow over 18 inches. The leaves and stems are pubescent which means that they're fuzzy like felt. The medium green leaf color looks touched with silver because of the pubescence and the leaves are heart shaped with small teeth along their edges.

The flowers, with five petals, have a short column in their centers to which the stamens are attached and from the end of which arises the style which has five parts, like tiny fingers, each of which has a stigma at its tip.

When fertilized, the seedpod which forms is called a capsule and is quite distinctive. When mature, it's shaped like a little brown tire and inside are a



circular row of flattened seeds. I remember, from my childhood, the seedpods on hollyhocks which were very similar. The heart-leaved hibiscus is, in fact, classified in the same plant family as hollyhocks: the mallow family.

Want a stunning touch of color in your yard? Try a wild hibiscus.